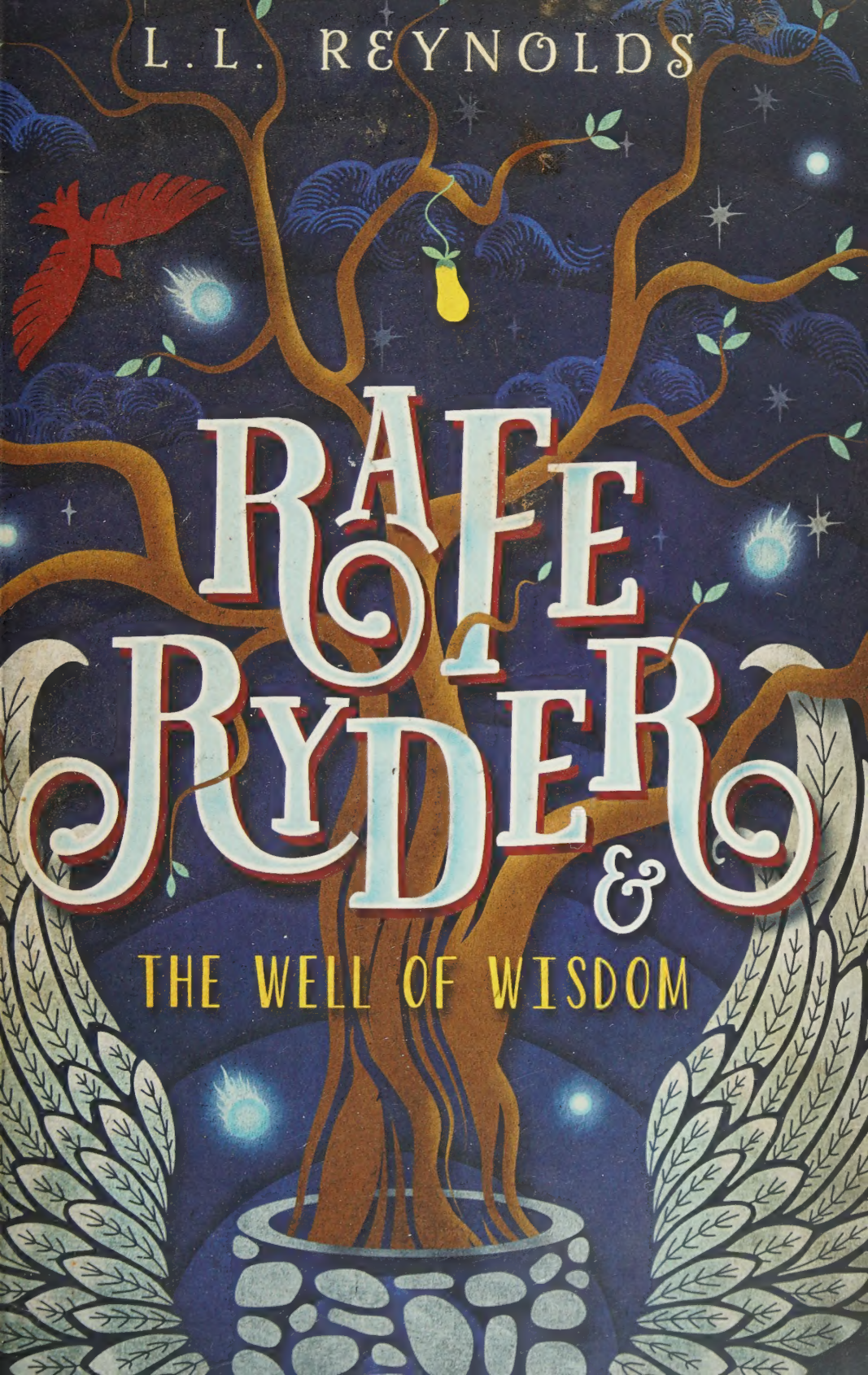


L.L. REYNOLDS



RAFE RYDER & Co

THE WELL OF WISDOM

RAFE
RYDER &

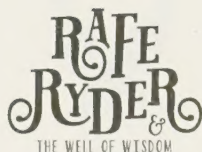
THE WELL OF WISDOM



RAFE RYDER &

THE WELL OF WISDOM

L. L. REYNOLDS



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*For my parents,
Rich and Tina Reynolds*

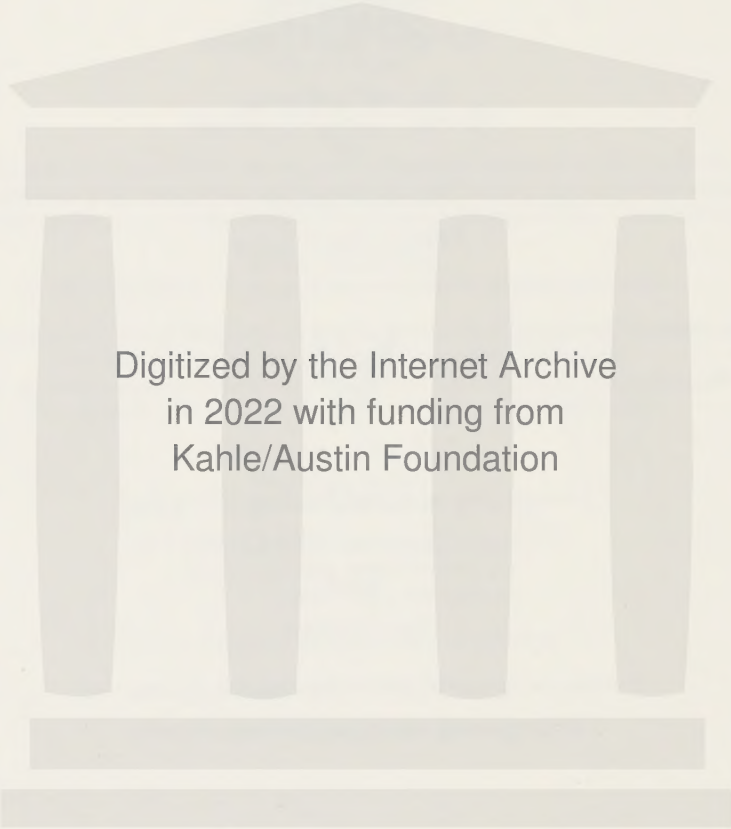
*For my husband,
Cliff*

*For my children,
Mindy, Evan, Lara*



*In memory of Ethel Darling Campbell
"Gramma Ethel"
and
Toni Wyman*

*It was an honor to be in the orbits of these two
strong, wise, compassionate women.*



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THE RINGS OF MYSTFIRA

1

the island of palades

Madri Ezekial/Powers

The Amethyst Palace

Cloak of Purple

2

the sea of umber

Madri Omega/Carrions

The Palace of UMBER Cascades

Cloak of Orange

3

the truvian Ring

Madri Typhicus/Administrator

The Javartan Village

Cloak of Stripes

4

the fairy forest

Madri Fey/Fairies

The Tree of Tuatha

Cloak of Yellow

5

the Ring of Rocks

Madri Avalon/Cherubim

The Rose Quartz Palace

Cloak of Rose Pink

6

the weeping woods

Madri Roanin/Seraphim

The Red Beryl Palace

Cloak of Crimson

7

mukrot

Madri Keva/Dominions

The Palace of Turquoise

Cloak of Turquoise

8

the valley of waterfalls

Madri Estel/Virtues

The Winter Blue Palace

Cloak of Pale Blue

9

the jungle of equinox

Archangel Michael

The Golden Palace

Cloak of Gold

10

the desert

Madri Isabo/Guardians

The Palace of Pearls

Cloak of Silver

11

the Ring of ashlot

Madri Saniel/Thrones

The Emerald Sky Palace

Cloak of Emerald Green

12

the Ring of ice

Madri Uriah/Principalities

The Sapphire Sky Palace

Cloak of Royal Blue

CAST OF CHARACTERS



1



Rafe Ryder

Grandson of Lady Jane Ryder

GROUP: Royal Rangers

COSTUME: Indiana Jones

HOME: England

Lady Jane Ryder

Headmistress of Ryder-Knight
Academy and Rafe's grandmother

COSTUME: Mrs. Santa

HOME: Maine

Baylor Wingate

Fraternal twin to Blake Wingate

GROUP: Royal Rangers

COSTUME: Peacock

HOME: Maine

Blake Wingate

Fraternal twin to Baylor Wingate

GROUP: Royal Rangers

COSTUME: Zorro

HOME: Maine

Deidre Dunn

Cousin to Blake and Baylor Wingate

GROUP: Royal Rangers

COSTUME: Cleopatra

HOME: Maine

Tahj Sharuk

Classmate of Rafe's

GROUP: Royal Rangers

COSTUME: Cowboy

HOME: India

Oliver Harper

Classmate of Rafe's

GROUP: Royal Rangers

COSTUME: Peter Pan

HOME: Texas

Ebon Lavey

Classmate of Rafe's

GROUP: Royal Rangers

COSTUME: Spock

HOME: South Africa

Gerard Rial

Classmate of Rafe's

GROUP: Royal Rangers

COSTUME: Firefighter

HOME: Maine

Audra Monroe

Classmate of Rafe's

GROUP: Royal Rangers

COSTUME: Christmas Caroler

HOME: Massachusetts

Parker Sutton

Classmate of Rafe's

GROUP: Royal Rangers

COSTUME: Red Riding Hood

HOME: California

Sullivan Cabot

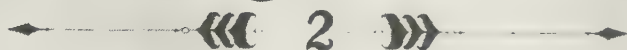
Classmate of Rafe's

GROUP: Royal Rangers

COSTUME: Mobster

HOME: Vermont

CAST OF CHARACTERS



Neal Trask

Classmate of Rafe's
GROUP: Thunder Stars
COSTUME: Ninja
HOME: Rhode Island

Mikko Kaouri

Classmate of Rafe's
GROUP: Thunder Stars
COSTUME: Witch
HOME: Japan

Luke

First-responder on beach
and in corn maze
HOME: Araboth

Thomas

Luke's Jarvartan
HOME: The 3rd Ring of Mystfira

Seamus O'Shanahan

The Leprechaun
HOME: The 5th Ring of Mystfira

Poppe

Fairy who mixes up her words/
twin to Potts
HOME: The 4th Ring of Mystfira

Potts

Highly energetic fairy/
twin to Poppe
HOME: The 4th Ring of Mystfira

Prentiss

Librarian from Jarvartan village
HOME: The 3rd Ring of Mystfira

Zane

Librarian from Jarvartan village
HOME: The 3rd Ring of Mystfira

Simon

Baylor's red-tailed hawk
HOME: Wherever Baylor is

Leopold

Baylor and Blake's yellow
Labrador Retriever
HOME: Maine

Sion

Angel in dance class
HOME: The 10th Ring of Mystfira

Diadem

Student angel/famous for belching
HOME: The 10th Ring of Mystfira

Malachi

Student angel/most athletic
HOME: The 10th Ring of Mystfira

Haven

Student angel/most studious
HOME: The 10th Ring of Mystfira

Shar

Student angel/opinionated
HOME: The 10th Ring of Mystfira

RAFE
RYDER &

THE WELL OF WISDOM



Chapter One

Storm Warnings

In every ending, there is a new beginning.

Twelve-year-old Rafe Ryder stared at the narrow slip of paper between his fingertips in disdain. Three days ago, his life flushed straight down the toilet, and he resented any attempt to put an optimistic spin on the situation, especially from a stupid fortune cookie.

He glanced at the sophisticated elderly lady sitting next to him. Sure, she looked innocent enough, nibbling on a spare rib with long white hair pulled into an effortless updo, but Lady Jane Ryder was a granny who could scheme with the best of them.

“Did you have anything to do with this?” he asked, setting the fortune on the kitchen table and tapping it with his index finger.

His grandmother dabbed her lips with the corner of her napkin. “My dear boy, you cannot hold me responsible for everything you find written inside a fortune cookie just because I asked Mr. Chou Chou to tuck a few reassuring words inside one of them years and years ago.”

“Uh—yes, I can.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, young man. Back then, you believed everything written inside one of those. The only way to convince you to take swimming lessons was to have a fortune cookie tell you ‘not to be afraid to take the plunge.’ Furthermore,” she said,

wagging a finger at him, “you’re the one who fished those out of the fortune cookie barrel at the restaurant, not me.”

Rafe crossed his arms and scowled. “Actually, I didn’t. There was a little girl sitting on the lid, and she handed them to me.”

“Was that the strange child who bolted past us like her hair was on fire while I was paying for the takeout order?”

“That’s the one.”

His grandmother leaned forward and covered Rafe’s hand with her own. “I’ve never seen her before in my life, and I swear to you—if I’d had anything to do with your fortune tonight, it would have read: *Your troubles are few and far behind.*”

“Okay, but given your track record, you can’t blame me for being suspicious,” he said, flashing a smile. “Let’s see what yours says.”

“Fair enough.” Lady Jane placed her reading glasses on the tip of her nose and untwisted the wrapping from the last cookie. Sliding it out of its packaging, she broke the cookie in half, and pried the fortune from its golden hollows.

As she examined the small scrap of paper in her hand, her back stiffened and she huffed. Rolling the slip of paper between her thumb and index finger, she crumpled it into a ball and flicked it into the trash bin in the corner of the kitchen.

“What did it say?” asked Rafe.

“It didn’t say a thing. Poor old Mr. Chou Chou baked a blank slip of paper into my cookie. I’d ask for a refund if they weren’t so delicious.”

Rafe raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Yes, that *is* certainly so!” snapped Lady Jane, picking up her lemonade and walking out of the kitchen.

Rafe followed his grandmother to the screen door of her wrap-around porch and found her staring at the twinkling lights

over the bay, lemonade glass pressed to her cheek. He watched as she lowered herself onto a swing at the end of the porch and sipped her drink.

It was unlike her to speak sharply, but he suspected that the shock and strain of the last few days had taken their toll on her, too.

Rafe pushed open the screen door and whispered, "Lady Jane?"

She smiled and beckoned him towards her. "Come sit, my darling. I'm afraid this ninety-degree heat has left me rather snippy. It feels like late summer instead of late fall."

"That's for sure," said Rafe, striding to the swing and plopping down beside her. "What do you suppose my parents are doing right now?"

"There's a five hour time difference between London and Maine so I would hope that they're sleeping, but, please, let's not dredge up the subject of your pigheaded parents one more time today," she said, patting his hand.

Pushing back a lock of thick brown hair plastered to his forehead by the heat, Rafe heaved a sigh and glared at the moths flapping around the porch light. Normally, he loved sitting on Lady Jane's porch when he visited Maine, but he couldn't enjoy the sway of the swing or the sounds of the surf beneath him because he couldn't stop thinking about the oppressive heat, his parents, or that blasted slip of paper he'd seen his grandmother pitch into the bin in the kitchen.

His grandmother's voice jolted Rafe back to reality. "You know, my dear, I've been thinking—"

"I'm not sure you should be doing that," he said, momentarily forgetting his angst. "I've heard thinking can be exhausting for someone of your age."

Lady Jane tweaked the tip of his nose. “Cheeky boy, *everything* is exhausting at my age. Let’s get back on topic, shall we? I was going to ask you if you’d like to call me Granny instead of Lady Jane.”

Rafe fixed his grey-blue eyes on his grandmother. He wasn’t a kid anymore, and he’d never called her anything other than Lady Jane. He’d made entirely too many unnecessary adjustments in his life lately, and he wasn’t about to make another.

“Let’s not change anything between us because of what’s happened—except maybe the nose-tweaking thing, since I’ll be thirteen in three weeks,” he said with a peevish squint.

“So you will. I do hope I can remember not to do it again, but, at my age, it’s often difficult to recall things the next day,” said Lady Jane with a smile. She looked at her watch and pushed herself to her feet. “I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted. I think it’s time we call it a night.”

“I’m with you on that,” he replied, “but I’m going to do us both a favor and take the rubbish out so the kitchen doesn’t smell like old Chinese food in the morning.”

“Considering the heat, it’s probably a good idea. Thank you and sleep well, my darling,” she said, blowing him a kiss from the doorway.

Rafe waited until he heard his grandmother climbing the stairs before making a mad dash to the kitchen. He rummaged through the trash until he found the small ball of crushed paper that she’d thrown away. Pulling it from the bin, he smoothed it out.

Rafe’s fortune had been hand-lettered in neat black print, but Lady Jane’s had been hastily scrawled in bold red ink and capital letters:

TRouble IS ON THE HORIZON! THE WORST IS YET TO COME!
BE WARNED, THE STORM APPROACHES!

“Rotten fortune cookies,” fumed Rafe as he ripped the paper into tiny shreds and threw it back into the trash.

His grandmother lied to him, but at least he knew why. Trouble wasn’t just on the horizon. No, trouble had sucker-punched his family three days ago, and neither Lady Jane nor he needed to be reminded of it.

He tied up the trash bag, carried it to the mudroom, and flung it into the garage with a grunt. As he climbed the steps to his bedroom, he decided that he didn’t care how delicious Mr. Chou Chou’s homemade, hand-lettered fortune cookies tasted. He’d never eat another one. Besides, he didn’t plan on staying in Maine long enough for it to become an issue anyway.



Chapter Two

Fireballs

Rafe woke the next morning to find that his mood had not improved, and neither had the weather.

After he moped the morning away, and carved his pork pie into the shape of England at lunch, his grandmother's self-preservation skills kicked in. "The heat is having a terrible effect on your mood. That's it. I'm sending you down to the beach to cool off. Go," she said, marching him out the door.

Rafe wanted to tell Lady Jane that his mood had nothing to do with the heat, but he suspected she already knew. He'd made it quite obvious.

Slipping out the back door into the woods next to the house, he followed a well-worn path to the edge of the nearby sea bluffs. The gilded sky mirrored in the tranquil water beneath the jagged cliffs was extraordinary, but the heat of high noon proved equally impressive, and Rafe felt himself withering under the sun's stifling rays. Hoping to scout out a cool ocean breeze, he located a sensibly inclined trail and picked his way down to Rockface Beach.

It was low tide, which meant there would be plenty of watery cracks and crevices to explore. Leap-frogging over a series of boulders, he plunked down next to a large tide pool and swirled his fingertips through the clear water, taking care to avoid the spikes of a sea urchin poking up from its shallow depths.

From past experience, Rafe knew it was best to leave the tiny creature alone, but, truth be told, a sea urchin's sting would be preferable to the crazy train he'd been riding for the last few days.

He could kick himself for being so oblivious to the monster that had gutted his family. Thinking about it now, he realized his first clue should have been when his father, a world-renowned pianist, had suddenly canceled his summer concert schedule. Rafe's mother immediately followed suit and handed the reins of her dance studio over to a trusted colleague. Then his parents whisked Lady Jane and him away on a six-week summer vacation to the Greek Isles.

During their family holiday, his normally agile father had been all fingers and thumbs, tripping and knocking into things on a regular basis. After they returned home, his father's klutziness continued at an alarming rate, but his parents downplayed it until four days ago . . . when they dumped a stomach-churning secret on him.

Rafe's father was sick with something called Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, or ALS, a neurological disease that steadily progressed until all the muscles in his father's body became paralyzed.

To make matters worse, his parents determined that Rafe was not going to remain in England to watch his father suffer; nothing would change their minds. They sent him away to Maine to live with his grandmother.

He'd been placed on a flight to the United States and met by Lady Jane at the airport only yesterday morning. "It's not fair. I should be home. This should have been my choice," he'd said to his grandmother.

Lady Jane's eyes had filled with compassion. "I totally agree

with you. It *should* have been your decision, but, in their defense, they were only trying to protect their child."

"I don't need to be protected. I'm *not* a child!"

"Of course you're not. I only meant your parents wanted what was left of your youth to be as happy and carefree as possible," she soothed. "Do try to forgive them; their intentions were good. I know how hard this is for you, but we'll muddle through it together."

For the briefest moment, Rafe witnessed the pain and grief Lady Jane hid behind her azure eyes before her steely resolve returned. He realized his grandmother understood better than anyone else what he was feeling. His father was Lady Jane's only child, and she spent every summer with her son and his family, whether it was in Maine or in England, for as long as Rafe could remember. She'd begged his parents to allow her to help them during this crisis, but they'd turned her away, too.

The cry of a seagull roused Rafe from his reflection. Scooting to his feet, he hopped off the boulder, determined to turn his pain into purpose. He didn't care how long it took; he'd think of a way to get back home.

Lost in thought, Rafe traipsed down the shoreline until an unexpected draft ruffled his hair, followed by another, and then another. Never before had a breeze felt so good on his face and neck, and he paused to fill his lungs with fresh, cool air before surveying his surroundings.

It took one look at the green-colored sky and the choppy ocean for Rafe to know a storm was brewing. He'd need to beat a hasty retreat back to his grandmother's house, or he'd soon be in trouble. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he began to retrace his footsteps along the beach at a brisk pace.

"Last one, Leopold! I mean it!" called a girl playing with a

yellow Labrador retriever on the beach ahead of him. Her long dark hair tossed in the wind as she flicked a little red saucer into the air.

A ferocious gust of wind caught the disc and sent it spiraling out over the ocean. The dog followed, plunging into the rough surf to fetch his prize while the girl cast an anxious eye skyward. "Leave it, Leopold! We've got to go! Come!"

Closing the gap between himself and the girl, Rafe watched a wispy mist roll off the sea and creep onto the beach. A chill ran up his spine as the mist snaked towards him, its thin skeletal fingers thickening around his ankles before swallowing them whole.

A deep, low-pitched growl emanated from the heavens, and fat drops of rain began to pelt the ground. There was no way to outrun this storm now. *Blast!*

In mere moments, the thunder swelled into deafening booms, which reverberated so violently Rafe feared the sky might rip in half. Black clouds roiled and ribbons of lightning lashed the sky as he scanned the beach for shelter. As marble-sized pieces of hail suddenly spewed from the clouds, he spotted an overhanging rock ledge behind the girl.

Rafe sprinted over the beach's slippery rocks, while the girl paced the water's edge, cringing and covering her head with her arms while the hail battered her. "Come on, boy! You can do it!" she screamed. "Come on, Leopold! Swim!"

Nearing the ledge, a bolt of lightning stabbed the ground in front of Rafe and sent him sprawling backwards onto the rocky beach. He felt dazed and confused, but one thing he was sure of, every muscle in his body burned with a strange tingling sensation, and it felt quite unpleasant, to say the least.

He pushed himself into a sitting position just in time to see

another jagged bolt of lightning strike the ground, flinging five fiery balls from its center. Rafe narrowed his eyes and forced himself to focus on the fireballs ping-ponging about the beach. The largest was the size of a basketball and the smaller ones were the size of grapefruits.

Maybe he'd been so stupefied by the lightning that he was hallucinating. Yeah. That had to be it. He closed his eyes and shook his head to clear his vision. When he opened them, the hail had stopped, and the fiery balls of lightning had vanished. Relief washed over Rafe in waves.

"You there! Are you okay?" called the dark-haired girl from the shoreline.

"Y—yes. It didn't hit me. Get under that ledge over there. I'll be right behind you."

The girl did not reply. Staring into the sky, she seemed transfixed by something above his head. He heard a faint sizzling noise as tiny sparks rained down around him. *Uh-oh*. Rafe tilted his chin towards the sky, and his muscles stiffened as his suspicions were confirmed. The rotating balls of flame hadn't disappeared; they were stalled directly over his head.

As Rafe's belly flopped a four-alarm warning, the lightning balls sputtered to life and launched themselves, not towards Rafe, but towards the astonished girl, their fiery tails crackling and hissing.

"Run!" shouted Rafe.

Terrified, the girl turned and staggered over the slick rocks as more rain started to fall, but her floundering cost her time and one of the lightning balls was close to hitting her.

Rafe lurched to his feet and teetered towards the girl. He'd never make it in time to help her, but he had to try.

"Kee-eeee-an!" From out of nowhere, a bird swooped out

of the sky, knocking the girl to the ground and out of harm's way. The bird then proceeded to chase after the flaming ball, screeching.

"Get up! Keep running!" shouted Rafe.

The girl scrambled to her feet and continued running. The other fireballs slowed, but another one gained on her. She veered in different directions to no avail. The spheres followed her like heat-seeking missiles.

As another lightning ball took aim at the back of the girl's skull, Rafe heard frenzied barking, and the girl's Labrador raced past him.

"Duck!" cried Rafe as the orb bore down on her.

The girl covered her head with her arms and allowed her knees to buckle at the same moment her dog reached her. Using the girl's back to catapult himself through the air, Leopold caught the fireball in his mouth where it shattered with a monstrous bang. An instant later, the Labrador flopped to the ground, as motionless as the stones on the beach surrounding him.

The girl crawled to the dog's side and buried her face in his neck. "Leopold," she sobbed.

Horried, Rafe watched the heartbreaking scene as the last three balls of lightning whirled towards the girl. He had to do something . . . but what?

"Get up now! Run! Do you hear me! Run!" screamed Rafe at the top of his lungs.

His shouting shocked the girl back to her feet, and she raced down the beach, the blazing orbs in hot pursuit.

Grabbing a piece of driftwood from the ground and dashing over the rocks, Rafe slipped ahead of one of the spheres. Raising the driftwood, he swung it like an all-star slugger. It connected with a solid thwack and the fireball disintegrated into a cloud of

sizzling sparks. Then he spun on his heels and began chasing the largest sphere, which zigged and zagged as he tried to clobber it with his crude wooden club. At last, the fiery sphere spun out over the ocean and disappeared.

Resting his hands on his knees, and panting for breath, Rafe looked around for the girl. She was nearby, and still running for her life. Unfortunately, the last fireball was just about to overtake her.

“Look out!” he shouted.

The girl cast a terrified look over her shoulder and jerked as much of her body out of the object’s path as possible, swatting at it frantically. The spitting hot ball clipped her arm with a horrifying explosion. The force of the blow threw her through the air, and her body landed on the beach with a sickening thud.

Dropping the driftwood, Rafe sprinted to the girl’s side. A small amount of blood trickled down the side of her face, and she looked deathly pale. Kneeling beside her, he placed his head close to her nose and mouth to see if he could hear her breathing. A warm breath brushed against his cheek. She was alive! Dropping his forehead to hers, he breathed a sigh of relief. The fireball had barely grazed the poor girl. He hated to think what would have happened if the blasted thing had actually made real contact with her.

Suddenly, Rafe heard a nasty sputtering noise behind him. Turning his head, he saw the lightning ball that he’d chased out over the ocean hovering a short distance away.

“You’ve got to be kidding. Not again,” he whispered in disbelief.

The burning orb began to move, gathering speed as it sailed through the air towards him. Rafe hunkered down, shielding the girl’s body as best as he could with his own and prepared for

impact. It didn't come. In the distance, he heard a hissing like someone throwing water on a campfire.

Lifting his head, he saw the fiery mass had halted and dwindled in size. That was a step in the right direction. Now if it would only keep shrinking. Keeping a cautious eye on the flaming remnants, he saw something stir in the mist behind it, and, to his astonishment, Leopold loped out of the haze, wagging his tail.

Rafe had never been more thrilled to see any creature in his life. "Come here, boy! Do you want to play fetch? Get me a stick."

Leopold eagerly retrieved a long slender piece of wood and raced back to Rafe's side. Taking the stick from the dog's mouth, Rafe gripped it like a sword, his heart thumping wildly in his throat as he faced the burning mass.

"Come on then. I dare you!" he shouted.

As if taking the dare, the fireball shot at him; Rafe swung his makeshift sword. He landed a mighty blow and the sphere exploded into scorching shards. Heart still pounding, he dropped to the ground beside the girl. Now he just needed to get her under the rock ledge, where they both could safely ride out the rest of the storm.

Rafe was considering how best to lift her without hurting her further, when a muscular young man wearing a white t-shirt and jeans emerged from a bank of fog. The auburn-haired man scooped the girl up in his arms and hurried towards the rock overhang.

Rafe sprinted ahead, ducked under the ledge, and scooted to the back of the shallow cavern. The stranger laid the girl gently on the ground, resting her head on Rafe's lap.

"So, what's your name, kid?"

"Rafe—my name's Rafe."

The man inspected the girl's head and ripped a piece of cloth

from the end of his shirt. He wiped the blood from her face. "I'm Luke. Who is she?"

"I don't know, but she got hit by some weird ball of lightning. Is she going to be okay?"

"There's a small cut above her left ear, but it doesn't need stitches," he replied. "She has a fairly good-sized lump on the side of her head and a burn on her wrist, which I'm willing to bet will leave a nasty scar, but I think she's going to be all right. How did you cut your hand?"

Rafe looked down at his hands and was surprised to see his left palm dripping blood. "I have no idea."

Luke tore another scrap of material from his shirt and tied it around Rafe's hand. "That can happen when there's a lot of adrenaline pumping through your body."

"Are you studying to be a doctor or something?"

"No," replied Luke, "but, fortunately for you, I'm an emergency first responder of sorts. There, that should stop the bleeding."

"Thanks. Are you sure she's going to be okay? She's still unconscious."

Luke pulled some hail under the overhang. "She'll come around eventually, and when the storm lets up, you'll need to help her get back to wherever she came from. Use the hail to make some icepacks for her. I've got to go, kid. You got this?"

Before he could reply, Luke walked back out into the storm and vanished just as quickly as he had appeared.

Rafe's eyes drifted down to the girl. Her tangled dark hair fell well past her shoulders, and she looked somewhat familiar. Then it came to him. This was the girl from Ryder-Knight Academy that everyone called the Sorceress.

When Rafe arrived in Clifton Cove yesterday, he had spent the afternoon signing up for classes and touring his new school,

Ryder-Knight Academy. In addition to being a junior boarding school, Ryder-Knight was also a preparatory school. He really didn't need the tour because he already knew a lot about the place, and for good reason. His grandfather, Lord Richard Ryder, founded the school more than forty years ago, and it had quickly become one of the most sought-after private schools in New England. When Lord Ryder passed away, Rafe's grandmother, Lady Jane Ryder, stepped up to take the reins. Not only was Lady Jane headmistress of Ryder-Knight Academy, she also served as the chair of the music department.

A girl named Melissa had been assigned to show Rafe around the campus and introduce him to his new teachers. Melissa talked a lot, and she had an opinion about everything and everybody.

When Rafe and Melissa walked into his new algebra classroom, they found the teacher administering a make-up exam. "Could you two come back in thirty minutes?" asked the professor in a hushed tone.

Hunched over a desk in a corner of the room, a girl with long raven hair looked up from her test. She smiled in surprise and acknowledged him with a wave of her fingers as he exited the classroom.

"Do you know that girl back there?" asked Melissa. "I certainly hope not because it would be very bad for you if you did. No one likes her. She is . . . well . . . creepy. There is just no other way to say it. We all call her the Sorceress."

"That's harsh," said Rafe. "Remind me not to get on anyone's bad side around here."

"Diane Peabody was the last person to make the mistake of becoming her friend. Last May, at the end of the school year, the Sorceress told Diane not to get on her flight home because it was going to crash."

Rafe grinned and cocked his head. "Wait, let me guess," he said. "You're going to tell me the plane actually crashed."

"Yes, and Diane is lucky to have survived. She's still recovering from her injuries and isn't able to attend school this semester. I'm sure you're not familiar with our school motto yet. It's *Ryder-Knight Academy—Where academics, arts, sports, and refinement are equally valued*. Our school days would be too long and demanding for her."

"You don't say? Aren't school mottos usually a bit more pithy than that," asked Rafe, pressing his tongue into his cheek and trying not to smile.

"If you're looking for pithy, then Ryder-Knight Academy is definitely not the school for you," she replied in a curt tone.

Contrary to what Melissa thought, Rafe knew the school motto. His grandparents firmly believed in it. Any student admitted to the academy had to be prepared for longer than average school days and mandatory participation in arts, sports, and etiquette classes. Most schools only attempted to turn out well-rounded, intelligent individuals capable of appreciating and participating in the world, but Ryder-Knight Academy excelled at it.

"Diane's not well enough to return to school, but even if she was, she is too spooked by the Sorceress. No one thinks she'll come back."

"That's quite a story," Rafe said.

"You think I'm making this up?" Melissa said. "Fine, believe whatever you want, but I'm warning you, the Sorceress is bad news. Ask anyone here at school. If you get chummy with her, terrible things will happen to you. Do yourself a favor and stay away from her."

Rafe smirked and shook his head. He seriously doubted

that befriending a girl on the fringes of society at Ryder-Knight Academy could make his life any worse than it already was.

Leopold's whimpering brought Rafe back to the present. "No need to get excited, boy. I'm going to help your friend," he said, reaching for the braided red, white, and blue bandanas hanging around the dog's neck. The dog whined, but held steady while Rafe removed them. He filled two of the bandanas with slush and tied them closed. He placed one over the bump on the girl's head, and the other over the small V-shaped burn on her wrist.

Peering out from the ledge, Rafe watched as the storm subsided. He readjusted the ice on the inside of the girl's wrist, and her eyes fluttered open.

"Oh, it's you," she whispered, trying to lift her head from his lap. "Are you okay?"

"Take it easy. I'm fine. I think the more important question is—are *you* okay?"

She gazed at Rafe with dark brown eyes. After a few moments, she pushed aside the wet bandana he held against her head and slowly propped herself into a sitting position.

"Do you remember what happened?" he asked.

The girl grimaced as Leopold licked her cheek encouragingly. "Um . . . I think I got hit by lightning."

"Yeah, that's right. How does your head feel?"

"It doesn't hurt that much, but this . . ." she said, gingerly touching the mark on her wrist, "burns."

"At least you can move it. You're lucky. Two of those things nearly hit you in the back of your head. Your dog saved you from one of them, and a bird came out of nowhere and saved you from the other one."

Eyes wide, the girl gasped and scrambled out from beneath the overhang. She hastily scoured the beach until she located a

sturdy stick and rushed back to Rafe's side. "Hold the other end of this. Simon! Come, Simon!"

"Birds don't come when they're called," he said calmly. "Maybe you better sit down."

"This one does. Just hold the stick!"

Rafe heard a hoarse, raspy cry as a large bird descended from the sky and landed lightly on the stick. The bird's broad, round tail gleamed a rich russet red. The magnificent creature appeared to be tame, and he allowed the girl to stroke his wings while she cooed to him softly.

"He's brilliant," whispered Rafe. "Is he yours?"

"He thinks I belong to him."

"What kind of bird is he?"

"Simon's a red-tailed hawk." The girl ran her hands over the bird's feathers, looking for injuries. "I don't think he's hurt, so we'll let him go now. When I count to three, pretend you're tossing the stick up into the air with me, but hold on to it. One . . . two . . . three."

Taking his cue, the hawk lifted from his perch and soared into the sky.



Chapter Three

The Fox

Rafe pointed to a steep path etched into the cliff in front of them. “We better get off this beach before anything else happens. Is that the path you came down?”

The girl nodded and started to climb the embankment. She took only two steps before losing her balance, and sliding backwards into Rafe.

“Oops, steady there.”

“Sorry about that.” The girl’s face flushed red.

“No need to be sorry. Let me help you.” With Rafe’s hand on the small of the girl’s back, they climbed the slick path without another slip; but, despite his help, the girl was out of breath and trembling by the time they reached the top of the cliff.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked.

“I think it’s safe to assume I’m going to be wobbly for a while, but who knows? If I’m lucky, I may have had a little sense knocked into me.”

Rafe chuckled. “At least you still have a sense of humor. Hey, did you notice it didn’t hail up here?”

“No, but I did notice your hand. What’s wrong with it?”

“I must have cut it on the rocks. I think it might need a stitch or two.”

She grabbed his hand. “May I look at it?”

Before Rafe could reply she began unwinding the bandana.

“Now, wait just a minute. I don’t want it to start bleeding

again," he protested as she pressed his hand between her palms.

"I'll be gentle," she replied.

Rafe scowled. "Do you have a fever? Your hands feel hot."

"Would you look at that?" she said, ignoring his question. "It's only a scratch. Boys are such babies."

"What?" He pulled his hand from hers and studied the wound with open-mouthed incredulity. She was right. The cut was barely visible now.

The girl wiggled three fingers in front of his face. "Maybe I wasn't the only one who hit my head on the beach. You don't seem to be remembering things too clearly. How many fingers do you see?"

"Very funny," said Rafe. "Let's get going."

Walking along the jagged cliffs, Rafe looked for familiar landmarks. Recognition flickered in his eyes as a circular stone tower and a long grey granite wall came into view. Glimpsing an imposing stone mansion on his left, Rafe's face relaxed. Now he knew for sure how to get them both back to the academy.

"That's one of the walls surrounding Cliff House, so we're inside the estate," he said. "There should be a gate and a path back to the school just ahead. Have you ever met the Wingate family, or is this the first time you've been here?"

The girl gave Rafe a puzzled frown. "I—I . . . Have you?"

"As a matter of fact, I used to come here a lot."

"So you know the people who live here?" she asked.

"I do. I'm good friends with them. Don't let the British accent fool you. I spent every summer in Clifton Cove until I was eight, and most of the time I was on this estate with the Wingate twins."

The girl looked at him like he'd just declared himself to be a flying purple pig. "Really?"

“Yes, really,” said Rafe. “Blake and Baylor Wingate. They’re fraternal twins, and they live up there in that mansion with their grandparents. “That reminds me. I don’t know your name. I’m Rafe.”

Scratching one of her eyebrows, the girl gave him a bemused smile and inhaled deeply. “I know who you are. I’m—What is that smell?”

As subtly as he could, Rafe sniffed the air around his armpit. He hoped whatever she smelled wasn’t coming from under his arms, but after what he’d gone through on the beach, it was a definite possibility. “I don’t smell anything. Why? What do you smell?”

The girl turned to look behind her. “Trouble,” she said, grasping Rafe’s arm.

A series of low throaty growls emanated from the wall behind them.

“Please tell me that’s your dog.”

“I’d love to, but I can’t,” she replied in a choked whisper.

Rafe whipped around and locked eyes with a large red fox glaring down at him from atop the granite wall. Tail whipping, the fox arched his back and snarled.

Rafe willed himself to remain calm for the girl’s sake, but he had no idea what to do next. Frankly, he couldn’t believe that he and the girl had survived the mother of all thunderstorms so a rabid animal could attack them. If Rafe lived to tell the tale, he was going to give his parents a piece of his mind. He would have been far safer if they had simply trusted him enough to be in charge of his own life—but no . . . they knew everything.

Suddenly, a young man limped between them and the fox, shouting and gesturing wildly.

“You two get out of here!” he shouted.

Rafe couldn't believe his eyes. It was Luke from the beach. Kid or not, Rafe wasn't about to desert an injured person to save himself. Luke could hobble over to the tower if Rafe could distract the fox for a few moments. Then, with any luck, he could outrun the fox on the way to the tower and slam the door shut before it pounced on him or Luke . . . but what about the girl? There was only one thing to do.

Rafe pushed the girl towards the path behind them. "Get back to the school."

"I will not," she said, tilting her chin in defiance.

The fox leapt off the wall and stalked towards Luke, its ears flattened and body pressed close to the ground.

Rafe charged towards the fox. "Get over to the tower, Luke!" he shouted. "They don't lock the outside door."

Rafe's plan was working beautifully, except Luke did not budge and continued to bellow and gesticulate at the fox. Hearing the noise from behind him, the fox faced Rafe and prepared to pounce.

Rafe inched backwards. "Easy there, Mister Fox. I don't want any trouble."

"Simon! Simon!" the girl shrieked over the din.

To Rafe's great relief, the red-tailed hawk screamed out of the sky, catching the fox's backside in his sharp talons and lifting the angry animal off the ground. The fox twisted, snarled, and snapped, trying to break the hawk's grasp, but it was no use. Simon flew the squirming brute off the edge of the cliffs and over the ocean. Giving the fox's tail a tug with his beak, the hawk released him into the sea with a triumphant screech.

Rafe skidded to the edge of the cliff just in time to see the fox emerge from the ocean and retreat down the beach, while Simon flew lazy spirals over his ocean drop zone.

"That bird is something else," Rafe said as Luke limped to his side.

"Agreed," Luke said.

Rafe looked at Luke's torn jeans. "What's the matter with your leg?"

"I twisted my knee. It's nothing serious, kid."

The hawk returned to the top of the cliff and balanced on a tree bough near the tower. Luke put two fingers to his brow and gave the hawk a short salute of appreciation.

The bird hopped to a lower branch, which drew Rafe's gaze to a small stump just below its perch. Someone had fashioned the stump into an intricate miniature abode. Shingled with autumn leaves, the roof blazed a flamboyant orange, providing a stunning contrast to the white birch paper beneath it. Braided grapevines curled around an opening in the front of the stump filled by an opulent grey-feathered door.

Pressed into a bed of green moss outside the house, smooth white paving stones led to five concentric circles. The inner circle contained a layer of mussel shells, followed by three more rings: brown pine needles, acorn tops, and sand, respectively. A border of peculiar looking toadstools formed the perimeter of the last circle.

"What is that?" asked Rafe as the hawk squawked and took flight.

"The estate grounds are littered with those things. From what I've been told, they're called 'fairy houses,' and the rings outside of it are called 'fairy circles,'" said Luke.

Rafe moved closer to the birch stump house. "Look over here. There are some markings scratched in the sand of one of those circles."

"They're probably squirrel or chipmunk tracks."

“They don’t look like animal tracks to me.”

Luke shrugged. “Well, then I guess the next possibility would be secret fairy communications.”

“Right, because that happens all the time,” said Rafe, rolling his eyes.

“You need to go home,” said Luke. “It looks like your friend has already gotten a head start.”

Rafe looked up in surprise. The girl was gone, along with her dog and the hawk. He had no idea how she disappeared.

“Go on home, kid. My friend, Thomas, is climbing up the path to meet me.” Luke pointed towards the cliffs, where a dark haired young man picked his way up the steep slope with a brown paper package tucked underneath his arm. “Try to stay out of trouble for the rest of the night, would you?”

“No worries, mate! I think I’ve met my quota for today,” said Rafe. With a quick wave, he set off towards the gate leading back to Ryder-Knight Academy.



Chapter Four

Cliff House

Rafe turned up his shirt collar against the nip in the air as he made his way back to his grandmother's house. Every now and then, a gust of wind blew through the treetops, swirling vibrant autumn leaves around him.

As a child, he remembered his mother telling him it was good luck to catch falling leaves in autumn. It was just a silly superstition, but considering how bad his luck had been lately, what could it hurt? He plucked an orange-red leaf from the sky and jogged towards his grandmother's house.

When he reached the driveway, he saw Lady Jane pacing the porch. He broke into a run and bounded up the steps to her side. "I got caught in the storm, but I'm fine."

"You're soaked to the bone. I sent you down to the ocean to cool off, but now you need a hot shower and a change of clothes," she said, giving his arm an affectionate squeeze. "You only have a half-hour before we leave, so you better make it snappy."

"Leave?"

"Did you forget? Tonight is the eighth grade Halloween corn maze, followed by the all-school bonfire."

"I did forget," said Rafe. "I'll hurry."

The truth was that he'd only been half-listening when his grandmother was talking about the corn maze yesterday. Apparently, it was a pretty big deal at Ryder-Knight Academy because the eighth grade team that solved the maze would win

a two-week trip to Paris, all expenses paid. A spot on one of the teams had opened up, due to another student's illness, and Rafe had been asked to fill the position.

He decided to wait until later to tell his grandmother about the day's bizarre chain of events. There was no sense in upsetting Lady Jane before the corn maze. He was fine, and the girl seemed to be okay as well. Still, Rafe hoped she'd been sensible enough to go straight to the infirmary when she reached the academy.

"Impeccable timing, my darling," said Lady Jane as Rafe rushed down the stairs pulling a dark green sweater over his head. "Bess Wingate made a costume for me to wear to the maze tonight, and she has one for you too."

Rafe followed his grandmother out to her car. "No one said anything about costumes," he grumbled.

If he'd known that he had to change into a Halloween costume at Cliff House, he could have stayed on the estate and called Lady Jane from there. It would have been entertaining to see what the twins said if he popped up on their doorstep looking like a drowned rat.

It took only a few minutes to get to Cliff House, but Rafe turned the car radio on anyway and flipped through several stations before deciding he didn't like any of the songs and clicked it off again.

"I almost forgot," said Lady Jane. "Your parents called while you were out. They miss you and they'll call again tomorrow."

"Well, they won't have to miss me much longer. I've got a plan, and I'll be back home by the end of next week," said Rafe. "Don't worry. I've worked it out so you can come, too."

A smile tugged at the corners of Lady Jane's lips as she steered the car through Cliff House's impressive wrought-iron front gate. "That's the spirit, my darling. As soon as we get home, I want to

hear every detail of your plan, but, in the meantime, it wouldn't be disloyal to your father if we both had a little fun with some old friends this evening. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Something tells me that it would be in my best interest to agree."

"Such an intelligent young man," said his grandmother, giving him a sidelong glance of approval.

The car rounded a bend in the long driveway and Cliff House appeared. The three-story stone mansion with its high roofs, decorative moldings, and large windows was, in the words of Lady Jane, "a masterpiece of interlocking geometric shapes blended into a truly unique work of art."

Two circular rooms with domes made of intricate stained glass were attached to either end of Cliff House. A vast garden conservatory, containing thousands of butterflies, lay under the largest dome, and the smaller domed room accommodated a formal ballroom. Rafe had almost forgotten the spellbinding way the glass gleamed in the late afternoon sun.

Lady Jane stopped the car in the crescent-shaped driveway in front of the ornate pillared porch. Rafe craned his neck through the window to get a better view of the tower room atop the mansion. He couldn't explain why, but the hexagon-shaped chamber and surrounding balcony had always been his favorite spot.

According to legend, a prominent Maine sea captain, Phineas Wingate, had been responsible for building three unusual light towers on the property. Two round towers sat on the edge of the cliffs, and a third hexagon-shaped tower sat between them, high on a hill above the bluffs. Rather than using the beacons to keep away from a dangerous spot on the coast, he'd utilized them to navigate into the deep harbor beneath the cliffs. When Captain

Wingate married, he built a mansion around the lighthouse on the hill so that his bride could keep the lights burning and watch for his safe return.

Lady Jane and Rafe got out of the car and scaled the front steps of the mansion. "This house never ceases to take my breath away," said Lady Jane.

Before Rafe could knock, the door swung open. A smiling older woman wearing a grey pilgrim dress and apron stood in the door, bouncing. "Come in, come in. We've been waiting for you two to get here. Gracious, it's been forever since we laid eyes on you, Rafe. You're all grown up," said an exuberant Bess Wingate, pushing a piece of stray grey hair behind her ear as she escorted them into the majestic entrance hallway. "Baylor, look who's here. I barely recognized him."

Pausing midway up the circular staircase, a costumed figure, blanketed in a magnificent cape of peacock feathers and masked in an elaborate feathered headdress, turned to look down at Rafe. Then, in a whirl of peacock plumes, the figure flew down the steps, grabbed his hands, and twirled him around with a high-pitched squeal.

"I know you're excited to see the boy, but stop spinning him around. You'll make him sick," said Bess. Take him upstairs and give him the costume that your brother decided not to wear while I get our Mistress of Ceremonies ready."

Baylor nodded and began dragging Rafe up the staircase behind her. They had only gone a few steps when they heard both of their grandmothers laughing.

"Baylor, what have you done? Wait until your grandfather sees this."

Rafe glanced over his shoulder. A large dog had padded into the entrance hallway wearing an indigo blue sweater, a smaller

version of the peacock cape, and a mask complete with long, droopy feathered ears.

"You poor darling," said Lady Jane as the dog sprawled on the floor and gazed at them with doleful eyes. "You look hilarious."

"I think he looks adorable," said Baylor.

At the sound of her voice, the dog rose and trotted towards Baylor, jostling the peacock cape enough that Rafe could see the dog's body. His jaw dropped as he recognized both the yellow Labrador and the familiar voice at the same moment. He was standing next to the girl from the beach!

"That's unattractive," she said, placing her index finger under his gaping jaw and closing it for him. "There. That's better."

Rafe caught her wrist in his hand and lowered his eyes to the angry red mark burned into her skin. "Baylor?" he said in wide-eyed astonishment as she jerked her hand away from him. Her long full sleeves tumbled back over her wrist, concealing her injury. "I didn't recognize you from the—"

"Classroom at Ryder-Knight Academy yesterday?"

"No, I mean on the—"

"Let's go," she said, clutching his hand and tugging him up the staircase.

Too shocked to resist, Rafe found himself halfway down the wide upstairs hallway before he pulled to a halt. "Why didn't you tell me it was you on the beach?" he demanded.

With a sigh of exasperation, Baylor lifted her headdress. "I thought you recognized me at school yesterday. I didn't realize you didn't know who I was until we were standing on the cliffs."

"I had no *idea* that you went to school at Ryder-Knight, so how was I supposed to know it was you? You were eight the last time I saw you. Your hair was as short as Blake's, and you didn't own a dog . . . or a hawk, for that matter."

"Blake and I have been going to Ryder-Knight ever since we were able to enroll there in sixth grade. Didn't you read any of the letters I wrote to your family?" she retorted. "This is our third year. Seeing me with a dog and a hawk should have been your first clue. Students who live on campus can't have pets."

Rafe's face flushed. "Look, I'm sorry for not recognizing you, but I'm really glad that you're okay," he said. "What did your grandparents say when you told them that you were struck by lightning?"

"I haven't told them yet."

"Are you crazy?"

"I'm perfectly fine. I'll tell them tomorrow, after the corn maze. I'll even go to a doctor if they make me, but our team can't afford to lose another member. Blake and I are just lucky that you agreed to take Zach's place tonight."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," said Rafe, waving his hands. "I'm on *your* team?"

"Yes, you're on the same team as Blake and me. Didn't Lady Jane tell you? Blake's gone to the academy to get the other three boys, and we're meeting them in the conservatory for sandwiches before we go to the corn maze."

"I'm sure she told me, but there was a lot going on yesterday, and I may have missed a detail or two," Rafe said. He felt his face blaze to life again.

Baylor touched his arm. "Never mind. If I were in your shoes, I'm sure I'd be missing half my marbles instead of a detail or two," she said. "Come on. You need a costume."

Rafe followed Baylor up the third floor stairs, down another wide corridor, and up a final spiral stairway. Leopold followed, tail wagging, at their heels.

The last of the sun's rays were glistening through the west

windows as they emerged from the swinging trap door into the tower room. Leopold flopped into a sliver of light and closed his eyes.

It had been a long time since Rafe had seen the hexagon-shaped chamber, but it was just as he remembered—replete with arched transoms, long graceful windows, blue velvet window seats, and a set of massive floor-to-ceiling glass doors.

He tilted his head backwards and ogled the room's spectacular stained glass dome. A beautiful angel, encircled by geometric patterns, gazed back at him. In an instant, all the happy hours he'd spent here with the twins under the watchful eye of that colorful glass guardian flooded back to him. The room was as captivating as ever!

Baylor opened the glass doors and stepped out onto the balcony that encircled the tower. "Do you want to help me feed Simon before you change into your costume?" she asked, poking her head back into the tower.

Tearing his eyes from the ceiling, Rafe joined Baylor on the balcony. Baylor removed two thick gloves from a hook on the outside wall, passed one to Rafe, and slipped the other over her left hand and forearm. Selecting a piece of raw chicken from a container on the wall next to her, she placed it between the index finger and thumb of her gloved hand. Then she gently slapped the top of the wall and called, "Simon, come!"

Simon appeared almost immediately, and Rafe shook his head in amazement. "I still can't believe that bird comes when you call him."

Although the hawk swooped out of the sky with great speed, he glided to a light landing on Baylor's gloved hand. Spreading his wings around the chicken, the bird devoured it.

"Why did he cover the food with his wings?"

"It's called 'mantling,'" Baylor said. "It's how they protect their food from other birds in the wild."

"How do you keep him from eating those peacocks running around on your grounds?" Rafe asked.

Baylor laughed. "Simon is well fed, and, besides, he grew up with them. He'll chase anything off the estate that tries to hurt them. Here. It's your turn to feed him." She tucked a piece of chicken between two fingers of Rafe's gloved hand. "Hold tight."

The hawk jumped onto Rafe's glove, mantling the chicken just as he had done earlier. When Simon finished, he glared at Rafe with large chocolate eyes.

"Whoa," said Rafe. "He's a little intimidating when he stares like that. Where did you find this guy?"

"His mother made a nest at the top of the tower four years ago and laid one egg. We don't know exactly what happened to her, but one day she just never came back. I'd been watching the nest, and when she didn't return, I took the egg back to my bedroom to keep it warm. Luckily, Simon hatched a few hours later. We've tried to return him to the wild a few times, but he always comes right back here. So, in order to legally keep him, Gramps had to become a falconer's apprentice because I won't be old enough until I'm fourteen."

"Simon must have imprinted on you then. I've heard about that happening with baby ducks and geese."

Baylor stroked the bird's head. "Probably, but I think it's more than that. Simon and I have a connection. We both know what it's like to have missing parents. Don't we, Simon?"

Rafe had almost forgotten about her parents' mysterious disappearance. The two well-respected college professors had gone missing just before the twins' second birthday. The police could find no evidence of foul play, but no one had ever seen or heard

from them again. To this day, it remained an unsolved mystery. It was no wonder Baylor identified with the hawk.

Rafe reached out his hand to smooth the bird's feathers. Simon squawked and nipped Rafe's finger with his beak.

"Naughty bird," scolded Baylor, chasing the hawk from Rafe's glove with one of her hands. "I'm sorry. He's never done that before. I don't understand what got into him."

Rafe shook his finger and put it to his lips. "No harm done. It's not bleeding—just a little pinch is all. Don't worry about it."

His finger hurt far more than he was willing to admit, but at least it wasn't bleeding. Some boisterous, distant voices ended the awkward silence between Rafe and Baylor. They both focused on four boys emerging from a path near the cliffs.

The boy in the lead dressed in black with a flowing Spanish cape and a flat-brimmed gaucho hat. Every once in a while, he would turn and brandish his sword in a playful, menacing manner, causing the others to erupt in laughter.

Baylor waved to the boys. "There's Zorro with the rest of our crew. Now might be a good time to use one of those memory tricks that your mother taught us when we were kids. You're going to be meeting a lot of new people tonight," said Baylor. "The tall boy in the Star Trek uniform is Ebon Lavey, and he's from South Africa. The boy dressed like a cowboy is Tahj Sharuk. He's from New Delhi, India. Last, but not least, the smaller boy in the Peter Pan outfit is Oliver Harper from Texas."

How could Rafe have forgotten? When his family summered in Maine, his mother had shared her memory games and techniques with the twins, too. One of her favorite ways to recall a list of things was by using acronyms. She'd taught each of them to arrange the first letter from a group of words they wished to recall into a silly word or a phrase. In fact, Rafe automatically used his

mother's technique when Baylor told him the boys' names, and he'd chosen the word TOE. T stood for Tahj, the O for Oliver, and the E for Ebon.

"I do," he said. "I'm surprised you remember, though."

"I remember all the times we had together with your family. I can't tell you how sorry I was to hear about your dad," said Baylor, her voice catching in her throat.

Up until that moment, Rafe hadn't thought about how the news of his father's illness would affect the twins. Summers in Maine had been magical for all three children. For a few short weeks out of the year, the twins had the parents for which they longed, and Rafe had the brother and sister of his dreams.

He took a breath and released it. "I know, and thanks, but I don't want to talk about it right now."

"Me either. I just wanted you to know." She opened one of the wide window seats and stepped into it. "Anyway, I've got to take the sandwiches to the conservatory, and you need to change into that Indiana Jones costume on the window seat over there."

Leopold scrambled to his feet and tried to climb into the window seat with Baylor. "No, no. Go the other way," she said, pointing the dog towards the other stairway. "It's too crowded in here for you."

"I don't know about the passageways, Bay. It's been a long time since I've been in them."

"Don't be silly. It's the fastest way to the conservatory. I'll turn on the lights, and all you have to do is turn them off on your way down. Just remember to go right every time the stairway forks. It'll come back to you."

Baylor vanished in a blur of feathers as the window seat lid slammed shut behind her.

Chapter Five

The Butterfly Conservatory



Rafe pulled on a pair of tan trousers and a safari shirt that had been left on one of the window seats. Then, as he secured an authentic-looking bullwhip through a special belt on his hip, he wandered out to the balcony to check Blake's progress up the lawn. The group hadn't quite reached the steps of the mansion's spacious back porch because they had stopped to watch two peacocks strut their stuff in full-feathered regalia.

At first the peacocks intrigued Rafe too, until a tall stump next to the birds arrested his attention. As he stared at the odd stump, Rafe saw a wooden face of considerable size staring back at him. Leaning over the wall, he sucked in a sharp breath as he recognized the face. It was Lady Jane!

Her face had been whittled into the side of the stump with remarkable detail. The artist had left her hair long and flowing, providing an intricate frame for her beautiful face. The carving was stunning, and, more than likely, the work of the twins' grandfather, Wood Wingate. It looked like there might be other faces cut into the tree on either side of Lady Jane's, but from Rafe's current angle, he couldn't be sure.

He hurried back into the tower where he shrugged on a leather jacket, placed a snap-brimmed fedora on his head, and opened the window seat to reveal the top of the concealed stairway.

Cliff House was riddled with narrow staircases and passages

CHAPTER FIVE

originally built for use by the mansion's domestic help. This labyrinth of channels had once granted the servants access to strategic areas of the house while conveniently hiding them from the family's view.

Rafe smiled as he peered into the window seat and saw the steep drop of steps. He and the twins had loved sneaking about the mansion and scaring the daylights out of people. Climbing into the passageway, Rafe eased the top of the window seat down and snorted a laugh as he recalled the time he'd sprung out from behind one of the gargantuan mirrors in the ballroom while his mother was dancing. She'd nearly had a heart attack.

True to her word, Baylor had left the lights on. He tread down the stairs, taking care to go right each time the stairway forked and switching off the lights behind him at each small landing. When he reached the first floor, he pressed a release lever on the wall in front of him, and a panel creaked open. Snapping the light off and entering the library, he found Baylor swiveling circles in a big leather desk chair.

"Finally," she said, jumping to her feet. "I was just about to go looking for you. By the way, that costume looks great."

Rafe closed the bookcase. "Thanks. I got sidetracked when I saw Lady Jane's face carved into that old tree stump. What's that all about?"

"That's right. You haven't been here since Gramps did the carving. A few years ago, the old tree got hit by lightning and had to come down. Gramps had the tree company leave the big stump and he carved your grandparents' faces into it as a tribute to his longstanding friendship with them. My grandparents' faces are carved into the other side of the tree, facing the ocean."

Rafe followed Baylor out of the library and into the entrance hall. "How do I not know any of these things?"

"You've been busy with your life, and I guess we just lost touch. We've missed you, though. Summers aren't the same around here without you."

"I missed you as well. It's too bad we live so far away from each other," he replied. "Are you the one building all the fairy houses on the lawns? The one down by the first tower is brilliant."

"It was Gram's idea, but it's become kind of a family hobby now," said Baylor, opening the first conservatory door and stepping inside a six-foot corridor with Rafe.

A gentle current of air, intended to prevent the butterflies from escaping on any unsuspecting visitor's clothing, greeted the pair with a breathy kiss. Rafe opened the second door for Baylor, and they stepped into the conservatory.

The atmosphere in the garden hung heavy with moisture and the fragrance of exotic blossoms. Thousands of colorful butterflies wafted through the air, pausing every now and then to sip nectar from a flower, or rest upon a plant. Small, vivid birds flitted through the lush greenery as five tiny button quail ambled across the path in front of them.

When Rafe had last been in the conservatory, he was far too young to appreciate its wonders. Now he was mesmerized by the tropical splendor surrounding him, as well as the striking stained glass dome over his head. Standing wingtip to wingtip, ten magnificent angels with kind faces and outstretched arms circled the dome.

Footpaths, fashioned from large grey paving stones, wound their way through the rainforest. Baylor chose a path that led them over a small arched bridge where they paused to admire a gently sloping waterfall cascading into a pond filled with Japanese Koi. Minute by minute, Rafe's new appreciation for the conservatory multiplied.

Rounding the next corner, Rafe glimpsed four boys standing under a white-pillared gazebo, ogling a tray of sandwiches. Blake looked up from the table and trotted up the path to meet them. "It's great to see you," he said, throwing his arm around Rafe's shoulders and giving them a shake. Rafe grinned.

Blake had the same dark hair as his twin sister and the same dazzling smile, but the similarities ended there. Standing a good four inches taller than his twin, Blake's blue eyes lit up the room, and deep, swoon-worthy dimples appeared in his cheeks whenever he smiled.

Baylor and Blake escorted Rafe to the gazebo where the other boys investigated the assortment of sandwiches.

"Welcome back to Maine, young man," said a man from a hidden alcove to one side of the gazebo. Dressed like a zany Mad Hatter, the man looked positively barmy, but Rafe recognized him at once. It was the twins' grandfather, Wood Wingate.

"Thank you, sir," said Rafe. "The conservatory looks better than ever."

"I must concur with the young Indiana Jones, Mr. Wingate. Your ability as a lepidopterist is undeniable, and the conservatory is most intriguing," said the pointy-eared boy dressed in a Star Trek uniform. "The *Acalypha Pendula* is simply stunning and the *Alpinia Purpurata* . . . divine."

Mr. Wingate looked pleased. "I see you're familiar with plants, Ebon. I have some rare bromeliads that you might appreciate."

"Fascinating. Could you direct me there?"

"I'll show you myself," said Mr. Wingate. "Would you children excuse me for a few moments?"

Rafe chuckled as the pair disappeared down one of the paths. "Your friend is really getting into that Star Trek character."

"No, that's just typical Ebon," said Blake with a laugh. "It's not an act. When it comes to science, Ebon is pretty serious. That's why we needed him on our team."

"Unlike me," said the boy wearing the Stetson hat and western duster coat. "I *still* don't know why they wanted me on their team."

"Rafe, this is Tahj Sharuk," Baylor said. "Don't listen to him. He knows he's on the team because he's a math genius."

Blake gave the boy in the Peter Pan costume a nudge in Rafe's direction. He had waves of golden hair and enormous green eyes. If Peter Pan were a real person, Rafe imagined he would look exactly like this boy.

"And I'm Oliver Harper. I'm not a genius, but I am the resident artsy-fartsy guy at Ryder-Knight. What's your area of expertise?"

"I'm not an expert on anything," said Rafe, "but I was on a fencing team in England, and I know how to play the piano a little."

"That's an understatement if I ever heard one," said Baylor. "Playing the piano is in Rafe's blood. Lady Jane taught his father how to play when he was young, and Rafe's father taught him."

"As luck would have it, my sister still plays that annoying violin of hers, so our team should be able to field any musical questions that get thrown at us this evening," said Blake.

Baylor pinched her brother's arm. "Will you stop?"

"Ouch! Take it easy, Scissorhands. I was just kidding."

"Forget the piano and violin. I want to see the fencing," said Oliver. "Can you show us some moves with Blake's sword?"

"No, he cannot. Not in this conservatory. Gramps would kill me," said Blake, "and I'd like to be alive when we win that trip to Paris tonight."

"Are we going to eat now or are we waiting for Ebon?" asked Oliver, eyeing the sandwich tray.

"There's no use waiting for Ebon. Knowing him, he's probably up to his knees in the fish pond right now examining a rare form of algae or doing something equally disgusting," said Blake, selecting a sandwich and popping half of it into his mouth.

Laughing, the other children helped themselves too, and under attack by four hungry boys, one girl, and a yellow Labrador, the number of sandwiches rapidly dwindled.

Someone behind Rafe tapped him hard on his shoulder. Surprised, he turned to see a heavily made-up girl dressed in a white tunic and beaded sash. Dangling a long black wig with a decorative gold snake headband from one of her fingers, she smoothed her short honey-colored hair into place with her free hand.

"Do you remember me?" the girl asked. She pressed her thin lips together and tilted her head to one side as Rafe gave her a puzzled look.

Blake snickered. "Think carefully. This shouldn't be too difficult for you."

The girl placed one hand on her hip and shot Rafe a petulant pout. "Grandmother told me that I should come say hello to you, and you don't even recognize me?"

Rafe looked into the girl's cool hazel eyes and smiled. It had to be Deidre Dunn. He'd only been around the twins' cousin a few times, but that was all he'd needed to discover that she was a handful-and-a-half. Rafe's mother had called her Deidre the Diva because when Deidre came to visit, it was her way or no way at all.

"Hello, Deidre," said Rafe.

"I knew you wouldn't forget me." Deidre smiled as she

placed the black wig on her head, adjusted the metal headband, and struck a majestic pose. “Do you like my costume? Guess who I am.”

“I’d say you were an Egyptian,” said Rafe.

“For heaven’s sake, you need to be more specific than that!” Deidre threw back her shoulders and tried a different pose. “Being an actress, I have always tried to portray specific characters with as much realism as possible. Try again.”

Rafe threw his hands in the air and shrugged.

“An Egyptian princess?” Oliver offered.

Deidre stomped her foot in irritation. “Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile.”

“Then, technically, Oliver was right,” said Baylor. “Wasn’t Cleopatra an Egyptian princess before she became the queen?”

Deidra threw Baylor a scornful look before focusing her attention on Oliver. “So, Oliver, I see you decided to go as Tinker Bell.”

“That’s enough, Deidre,” Baylor warned.

“Take it easy, cuz. I was only joking. I know he’s Peter Pan. It’s actually a fairly clever little costume.” Deidre strolled around Oliver, examining his outfit. “The stitching is reasonably good. Did you sew it yourself?”

Oliver’s face flushed bright red and he stammered, “I—I—”

“Everyone knows you sew, Oliver. It’s not a well-kept secret.” Deidre watched the boy squirm.

Baylor’s face reddened, and she squeaked out a high-pitched, disapproving sound.

“That noise you just made reminds me, Baylor. Apparently, you have a performance evaluation Monday, and Lady Jane said to tell you that she has time to rehearse your violin piece with you before the maze tonight.”

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"Come on, Oliver. You're coming with me," said Baylor. She grabbed the boy's hand and pulled him out of the gazebo.

"I'd love to. Besides I am tired of Cleopatra, Queen of the Vile, anyway," Oliver spat out over his shoulder.

Blake shook his head at his cousin. "Was that really necessary?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Are you kidding? You tried to humiliate the poor kid."

Deidre puckered her face into a haughty scowl. "That's an exaggeration," she said. "I don't have time for one of your lectures, Blake. My parents are waiting for me, so I've got to jet." She spun on her heels and exited the conservatory.

"What got into her?" asked Rafe.

"I'll tell you what got into her," said Blake. "Deidre wanted to join the Rangers, but we asked Oliver instead. She wouldn't have the nerve to try to settle the score with me, so she's taking it out on Oliver."

"No offense, but your cousin has never been known for her tact," said Tahj.

"None taken," replied Blake, consulting his wristwatch as Mr. Wingate and Ebon returned to the gazebo. "It's time to get this show on the road."

The boys hurried through the conservatory, Mr. Wingate following close behind. When they reached the exit, they quickly inspected one another for hitchhiking butterflies. Finding none, the group stepped into the grand entrance foyer.

The sound of eerie organ music filled the air. Sinister violin music echoed the chords the organ played. Looking around for the source of the sound, Rafe noticed Bess Wingate and Oliver standing at the ballroom door, which was slightly ajar. Bess pressed her finger to her lips and beckoned the other boys to join them.

Peeking through the crack in the door, Rafe saw immense mirrors in gilded frames on the far wall of the ballroom reflecting the polished parquet floor and stained glass dome above it. The room stood empty, except for a baby grand piano in the corner.

Since the room was empty, the music had to be coming from the ballroom balcony. In days gone by, the balcony accommodated a small orchestra, and it was home to an incredible old pipe organ. Looking up through the slit in the door, Rafe could see Lady Jane seated at the organ and, standing at her side, Baylor moving her fingers and bow across an electric violin.

Rafe was astonished by Baylor's musical ability. She played the violin as well—or, perhaps, even better—than any adult he had ever heard. “Why are we standing out here?” he asked.

“Shhh,” Ebon whispered. “Baylor doesn't play in front of people. She has performance anxiety.”

Bess nodded. “It's true. Baylor has terrible stage fright.”

As the last strands of the spooky music drifted through the air, Bess pulled the boys away from the door and motioned to a table in the foyer. “Lady Jane and Baylor will be coming downstairs in a moment, and Mr. Wingate is pulling the car around. I have electric lanterns for everyone. They're much better than flashlights. Please take one.”

“For goodness sake, why aren't you children already in the cars?” asked Lady Jane from the top of the spiral staircase as Baylor skipped down the steps ahead of her.

Rafe turned to see his grandmother descending the stairs in a gorgeous red velvet dress trimmed with white fur. A red and white fur cap sat atop her beautiful white hair, and a matching cape draped over one of her arms.

Bess clapped her hands. “Isn't she just the most beautiful Mrs. Santa you've ever seen?”

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The children joined Bess in applause as Lady Jane glided down the grand staircase. When she reached the bottom, Lady Jane pulled her floor-length dress to one side and dropped her audience a perfect English curtsy before exiting the front door.

Blake held up his hand, stopping Rafe and Baylor at the threshold as the rest of the group hustled outside. "I have a quick quiz for you, Ryder. What was the name of the song Baylor just played and who composed it?"

Rafe contemplated telling Blake the song was "Jingle Bells," music and lyrics by Rudolph Reindeer, but Blake looked so serious that Rafe didn't have the heart to torment him.

"I believe it's 'Toccata and Fugue in D minor' composed by Johann Sebastian Bach in the very early seventeen hundreds."

Blake looked at Baylor.

She nodded her head. "He's right."

Blake closed the door to Cliff House. "We're so winning this trip to Paris."



Chapter Six

The Royal Rangers of Ryder-Knight Academy

Rafe and his team drifted through a wooden archway draped with a gaudy red and white banner proclaiming “Cornelius Cobb’s Carnival of Corn.” Rafe gawked at the festival surrounding him. Groups of costumed children milled about dozens of booths filled with foods, games, and prizes.

With hundreds of colorful balloons dancing above them, the Ryder-Knight Rangers looped their way through the carnival area, periodically stopping to eat donuts, sample cider, and try their luck at a bag toss game called Corn Hole.

Oliver pointed to the side of a nearby barn. “Look,” he said. “It’s an aerial view of this year’s maze. Come on, guys. We should go study it.”

“Excellent idea,” said Ebon. “It might contain some useful information.”

When the children reached the barn, they discovered poster-sized pictures hanging beneath the large aerial view of the corn maze. Oliver pointed to a picture of the farmer in the process of creating the corn maze. “Wow, so that’s how old Corny Cobb does it. He uses a tractor equipped with a GPS.”

Rafe analyzed the picture of the corn maze. Chiseled into the corn was an intricate snowflake surrounded by a series of smaller flakes. “I should think Lady Jane would be terrified of losing the entire eighth grade in there. How many acres is that cornfield?”

"Fifty, but don't worry. No one gets lost—well, not permanently anyway," said Tahj with a laugh. "The cornfield is surrounded by floodlights, and there are tons of other safeguards in place."

Baylor noticed the crowd in the carnival area beginning to thin and tugged at her brother's sleeve. "We should get over to the cornfield. It's almost time to meet the rest of our team."

"The rest of our team?" Rafe asked.

"That's right. This is only half of our team," Blake replied as the little group strolled towards the field. "We have no control over the other half. It's selected by random draw. Right now, there are twenty teams with six members each, but when we enter the maze, there will only be ten teams with twelve members."

Oliver crossed his fingers and said, "Hopefully, we'll get another team that's just as good as the one we put together."

As they arrived at their destination, Rafe felt a tiny shiver of anticipation. Basking in the eerie glow of a full moon stood a vast field of corn, which the October frosts had colored a spooky brown. Cornstalks spiked the sky, looking tall, thick, and foreboding.

Talking excitedly, teams of costumed children began to congregate in front of a high platform outlined with twinkling white lights. Beneath the platform, clad in identical white tunics and quilted red jackets, a regal group of fifty medieval-costumed guards stood at attention. Ten more loomed on top of the platform, chain mail hoods gleaming in the moonlight, swords sheathed at their sides.

Blake noticed Rafe staring at the guards. "They're called Knights of the Corn," Blake explained. "They're upperclassmen at Ryder-Knight, and they know the corn maze inside and out. The farmer's been drilling them for weeks."

At that moment, the floodlights illuminating the cornfield snapped off, and a twinkling spotlight from an opening in a nearby barn trained upon the platform. Looking as regal as the Queen of England, Lady Jane ascended the steps escorted by one of the knights. The crowd of children tittered in excitement as she stepped to the microphone.

“Attention! Please, may I have your attention!” said Lady Jane. “Before we begin, Mr. Cornelius Cobb is going to explain the rules that must be obeyed while we are in his cornfield.”

A tall, gawky man dressed as a scarecrow climbed the platform to polite applause. He fiddled uncomfortably with the straw around his neck, cleared his throat, and stepped in front of the microphone. “The first rule is to always stay on the paths. In other words, do not plow through the corn to create your own shortcuts. Please do not pick, pull, or throw the corn. Also, there is no running allowed in the maze, but you are more than welcome to walk at a brisk pace. Next—and I cannot emphasize this strongly enough—no matches or lighters are allowed in the corn maze, and absolutely no smoking. The corn is dry and highly flammable this time of year.”

Mr. Cobb pointed to the young men beneath the platform. “Lastly, I want to tell you about the Knights of the Corn. They will be stationed throughout the maze to escort anybody found breaking the rules to the nearest exit. If any member of your team has to be taken out of the maze by one of the knights, your team will automatically be disqualified. However, if you get lost, injured, or sick, the knights will lead you out of the maze, and your team will *not* be penalized.”

The farmer moved away from the microphone and nodded to Lady Jane. She stepped back in front of the microphone. “Thank you for explaining the rules, Mr. Cobb. I am confident

that my students will be on their best behavior. Now for the moment you students have all been waiting for. It's time to finalize your teams and announce your entrance gates."

Reaching into a red stocking held by one of the knights, Lady Jane rummaged inside it and withdrew two cards. "The first two teams to be joined together this evening are the Ryder-Knight Stars . . . and the Ryder-Knight Thunder. Your team will henceforth be known as the Ryder-Knight Thunder Stars. Congratulations! Your team will begin tonight's adventure at the red entrance to the maze."

An enthusiastic cheer and loud whistles of approval rose from the crowd. The team captains shook each other's hands and clapped each other on the back.

"Rats, I was hoping we'd get the Stars," said Blake in a disappointed tone.

The Ryder-Knight Rangers squirmed as they waited for their name to be pulled from the stocking, but Lady Jane combined fourteen more teams, and still their name had not been called.

"Of the three teams left in that hat, only one of them is a good match for us," Ebon said.

Lady Jane selected the next card from her stocking. "The next two teams to merge will be the Ryder-Knight Rangers and . . ."

Oliver jumped up and down. "Finally!" he squealed.

"The Royal Ryder-Knights. Henceforth, your team will be known as the Royal Rangers of Ryder-Knight Academy. Your team will start tonight's quest at the green entrance gate."

The crowd applauded and all of Rafe's fellow team members rejoiced, except for Oliver. He was sticking his finger down his throat and producing uncivilized gagging sounds.

"What's wrong?" asked Rafe.

"That's Cleopatra's team," snarled Oliver through gritted teeth. "When the Rangers chose me instead of her, she put together her own team."

"Dial back the drama, Oliver," said Blake. "Deidre has put together an amazing team, and it was the only good match left."

Oliver crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah, but I don't have to like it."

Deidre elbowed her way through the crowd, her small troop in tow. She hugged Blake with a smile splashed across her face, while the members of the Thunder Stars surveyed the newly formed team from their positions at the red entrance of the maze. "Look at that. We've got them worried already," she said.

Frowning, Blake inspected Deidre's group. "You're missing someone. Where's David?"

Deidre's face darkened, but before she could reply, a girl dressed as a Victorian Christmas caroler scuttled up to Blake. "Oh, it's horrible!" said the girl. "The poor thing tripped on his costume and fell down an entire flight of stairs just before we left."

"The nitwit knocked himself out cold," sputtered Deidre. "The infirmary nurse insisted on keeping him for observation."

"I don't know how we'll win without him," said the Christmas caroler. Her exquisitely colored red-gold ringlets bobbed side to side as she shook her head.

"We'll be fine. We still have Ebon and Tahj," said Blake, touching the girl's shoulder and turning her towards Rafe. "Audra, I'd like you to meet our friend, Rafe Ryder."

"You must be Lady Jane's grandson."

Rafe felt his cheeks filling with color. "Must I?" he asked.

"I suppose introductions are in order," said Deidre. She pulled a girl dressed like Little Red Riding Hood to her side.

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“Rafe, this is Parker Sutton, my very best friend in the whole world.”

It was all Rafe could do not to stare as Parker pulled back her red hood, revealing beautiful blonde hair and a thousand megawatt smile. She was easily the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

Fortunately, a mobster in a pinstriped suit stepped in front of Parker and pumped Rafe’s hand, forcing him to tear his eyes away from the stunning girl. The mobster’s dark hair was slicked back with so much hair gel, the fedora he wore was in danger of sliding off his head at any moment. “I’m Sully Cabot,” said the mobster. “My mother is the only one that calls me Sullivan, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

From the rear of the group, a young man dressed as a firefighter tipped his hat to Rafe. “And I’m Gerand Rial.”

Rafe smiled and nodded to Gerand while he mentally arranged the letters A, P, S, and G in his head. He needed a word to go with TOE to help him remember the new people on his team. He settled on the word GAPS. TOE GAPS was funny and easy to remember; however, if Baylor questioned him later on his choice of acronyms, he fully intended to tell her that he was using a more sophisticated word: POSTAGE.

“Now, let’s get this show on the road,” said Blake, rubbing his hands together. “All that’s left are the last-minute instructions at our gate.”

The Royal Rangers of Ryder-Knight Academy headed towards their assigned entrance, Blake and Deidre in the lead.

Just then, Rafe heard the roar of a car engine being pushed to its limits on the highway above the cornfield. A red Maserati convertible veered onto the dirt road leading to the maze and sped towards the students, a cloud of dust billowing behind it.

When the car ran out of road, it fishtailed before coming to a screeching halt and sending a spray of loose dirt into the crowd of startled students.

A young woman emerged from the driver's seat and stepped into the beam of the car's headlights. "Jack? Jack?" she cried. "Jack! Are you here?"

One of the spotlights from the barn swung over the throng of astonished children until it came to rest on the agitated young woman. She wore a simple green dress, and a string of beautiful pearls encircled her delicate neck. She lifted a hand to her face in an attempt to shield her eyes from the glare of the spotlight.

"Please, can anyone help me?" she called. "I'm looking for my husband, Jack Morgan. Please!"

"Miss," said Lady Jane from the platform. "Miss . . . please compose yourself and allow one of these nice young men to bring you up to me."

One of the knights proffered his arm to the young lady. At first, she hesitated, rubbing her temples, but after a few moments she took the knight's arm and allowed him to escort her to the platform. Rafe could see her hand trembling on the railing as she climbed the steps.

"That stunt with the car was far too close for comfort. What possessed you to do something like that?" said Lady Jane as the girl reached the top of the platform. "You could have hurt one of my students."

The girl froze. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Never mind," said Lady Jane, extending her hand to the girl. "Come here, my dear, and tell me your name."

"Vivianna."

Lady Jane gave Vivianna a reassuring smile, and the girl took her hand. "Let's speak privately for a moment." She guided

the young woman to some empty folding chairs on top of the platform and sat down next to her.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rafe noticed Oliver dig into one of the pouches that hung from the belt of his costume. He withdrew a pencil with a little white feather on top, and a small pad of notepaper.

"What are you doing?" whispered Rafe.

"We should get our final instructions when Lady Jane is done talking to that girl. I want to write them down."

Lady Jane and Vivianna rose and walked back to the edge of the platform. Vivianna's eyes scoured the crowd.

"Students," said Lady Jane. "Look around and tell me if you see anyone here dressed in a white military uniform."

Low murmurings began as the students investigated their ranks. "Gabe is dressed like GI Joe, but he's wearing camouflage!" shouted a voice from the crowd.

Hearing nothing more from the students, Lady Jane said, "I'm sorry, darling. Your Jack does not appear to be here."

Vivianna shook her head in disbelief. "I don't know what to do. I've looked everywhere, and I don't know what direction to go in next. If I've lost Jack, I've lost everything. There would be nothing left for me. I can't believe this is happening to me on my wedding day. It's not right!"

"I know, my darling. It isn't right, but, in my opinion, forward is always the best direction in which to go," said Lady Jane. "I'd like you to tell the students what you told me a few minutes ago. Perhaps someone here will have some information that will help you."

Vivianna looked doubtful, but Lady Jane nodded at her encouragingly. "My name is Vivianna Pavlovitz Morgan. My fiancé and I eloped today. He's a naval officer and his name is

Jack Morgan. We were married during a private ceremony on the Bridge of Sighs this afternoon. It's that little covered bridge just down the road. He proposed to me there, too."

"That's so romantic," murmured Audra.

"After the ceremony, we went for a stroll along the stream underneath the bridge. Jack surprised me with a beautiful picnic lunch on a grassy knoll near the water. He fell asleep, but I was too hot to close my eyes, so I decided to go wading in the stream. I only left Jack alone for a few minutes," she said, voice faltering as tears rolled down her cheeks. "When I returned, he was gone. I know something terrible has happened to him. I can't find him anywhere."

"There, there," said Lady Jane, patting the young woman's back. "Vivianna tells me that Mr. Morgan is about six feet tall. He is a very handsome young man with short brown hair and blue eyes. He has been wearing his white naval dress uniform all day. Do any of you chaperones, students, or farm workers recall running into a man fitting his description this afternoon?"

Lady Jane gazed at the crowd, but no one responded. "I'm sorry, Vivianna," she said. "I thought perhaps we could help you, but it seems that we cannot. I think there is nothing left for you to do, except, perhaps to contact the appropriate authorities."

Vivianna looked up at Lady Jane with big wet eyes and hung her head. "I think you're right," she said, "but there's one more thing I should mention. I met a strange woman down by the water when I was looking for Jack. I think maybe she had something to do with his disappearance."

Lady Jane drew in a sudden sharp breath. "Was this woman dressed like a gypsy?"

"Yes. How did you know?" asked Vivianna.

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From somewhere behind them, the children heard the clip clop of horse hooves growing louder and louder.

Then, a female voice shouted, "Jane Ryder!"

Lady Jane turned towards the stranger and spoke with uncharacteristic sharpness, "Who's there?"

One of the spotlights swept the area and landed on a gypsy woman riding a large black stallion. The horse wore almost as much jewelry as the gypsy herself. The spotlight frightened the animal, causing the horse to rear on its hind legs. An unseasoned rider would have lost their balance and fallen off the horse, but the woman clung to the animal's back and dismounted with grace.

"Esmeralda?" gasped Lady Jane in disbelief.

Who was Esmeralda? He didn't know that his grandmother knew any gypsies, particularly one that had the audacity to address her without her title.

The gypsy strode towards one of the booths at the end of the carnival area, her long burgundy skirt swinging just above her ankles. A bright gold and green shawl swathed her waist and her long black hair, streaked with white, spilled out from underneath a matching scarf.

"That's her! That's her! What did you do with my husband? Answer me, you witch!" screamed Vivianna.

"I be no witch!" Esmeralda shouted.

Lady Jane silenced Vivianna with a stern look. "Esmeralda, do you know what happened to this woman's husband?"

A man operating one of the carnival booths held out a microphone to the gypsy, who took a step closer to him so that her voice could be amplified.

"Yes, Jane Ryder," she replied in a gentle tone. "I do. I *told* her what happened to her husband."

Vivianna exploded again. "You're lying!"

"Tell me what you know, Esmeralda," said Lady Jane.

"The meadow near the bridge be haunted with fairies of the sidhe. Her man made a bed upon a fairy mound, and while he slept, the fairy queen spirited him away."

"You see!" Vivianna wailed. "She's crazy and she's a liar!"

"It be Samhain, Jane Ryder. The veil between the spirit world and ours be terrible thin this day."

"Oh, yes," whispered Ebon. "I've read that our Halloween rituals evolved from the ancient harvest festival of Samhain. The ancient Celts believed that souls of the dead were set free to roam the earth on that night, so they wore costumes to hide from the malevolent spirits and lit bonfires to scare them away.

"See!" howled Vivianna. "The woman is crazy!"

"Hush, child," said Lady Jane. "Esmeralda, do you know where the fairy queen has taken Vivianna's husband?"

Rafe gaped at his grandmother. Lady Jane was as sensible as they came. Was she really buying the gypsy's story?

Esmeralda lifted a wrist dripping with bangles and pointed a crooked bony finger towards the cornfield. "Into the field of corn, but do not try to find the fairies unless ye intend to bring them gifts. They be wanting food, drink, gold, and flowers."

With that, the gypsy threw her hands over her head and disappeared in a dramatic puff of smoke, leaving the man holding the microphone singed and surprised.

"Students," said Lady Jane, "your mission tonight is clear. Find and reunite Vivianna with her husband. Once in the maze, your teams will be expected to locate five stations. Solve the puzzles at each station, and bring the gifts you receive to the fairy mound. Once there, you may attempt to save Mr. Jack Morgan from the fairy queen. Follow the clues you have just heard, and you will find your direction. Good luck!"

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Blake chuckled as the Ryder-Knight students applauded. "She tricked us," he said.

Rafe had to hand it to his grandmother. It was an extraordinarily clever way to begin the corn maze. No wonder Baylor had been so reluctant to miss the night's festivities.



Chapter Seven

Seamus O'Shanahan

“**T**hat was epic! I honestly had no idea what was going on until the very end,” said Parker as the Royal Rangers waited for their final instructions at the green entrance to the maze.

“I didn’t either,” said Audra. “It was fantastic!”

Sully placed the back of his hand against his forehead and fluttered the other over his heart. “It surely was,” he teased in a high-pitched southern drawl. “Why at times, I was so overcome with emotion, I could barely speak.”

Rafe and the rest of the team laughed as the two girls took turns playfully shoving Sully until the ten entrances to the maze blazed to life, each lit by a powerful spotlight.

The sudden beat of a lone drum brought the Knights of the Corn to attention. Marching rhythmically in two columns, they snaked past the children, depositing six knights at each entryway, where they paired off and faced one another ceremoniously.

“Knights, draw swords!” shouted their leader. With the cutting edges of their steel facing upward, the knights drew their swords and raised them into a high arch, their tips crossed and nearly touching. “Knights, restrict access!” bellowed the leader. The knights at each entrance responded by lowering their crossed blades to waist level.

“Here are your final instructions,” said Lady Jane from the

platform. "The most important thing to remember is that your entire team must be together at the end of the maze or you will not be permitted to answer the riddle at the fairy mound. When the first team has solved the maze, there will be three short blasts from an air horn to alert the other teams that the competition has been won. We will then head back to the Ryder-Knight campus to celebrate the winners at an all-school bonfire event. Your teams will have five minutes to strategize before entering the maze. Good luck!"

"Circle up, Royal Rangers, and let's talk strategy," said Blake. The team obediently gathered around him.

"I have been studying the psychology of solving mazes in preparation for tonight," said Ebon in a hushed tone. "Most people tend to go right upon entering a maze and proceed counter-clockwise. Those who design mazes are familiar with this behavior and plan the mazes so they can only be solved by making counter-intuitive moves. I believe that we should take a left upon entering the maze."

"So you'd like us to run the maze on a purely logical basis," said Deidre.

"What would you like to base it on then? Woman's intuition?" Ebon asked.

"Not exactly, but there has to be something more to solving this maze. They'd be expecting us to do the 'logical' thing," said Deidre, using air quotes when she said the word "logical."

Ebon wasn't about to budge. "Given the trickery we have witnessed here tonight, it is my opinion that we should make counter-intuitive decisions in the maze. I believe that is how we will most rapidly find the first station. Who agrees with me?"

The group erupted in disagreement with Ebon and Deidre almost at each other's throats.

Crossing his arms, Rafe compressed his lips in a tight line while the rest of the team quarreled. *So much for teamwork.*

Oliver had retreated from the battle, too, and was slouched over his notepad. All at once, he straightened. "Guys, guys, guys!" he shrilled over the noise, waving the notepad in the air until everyone stopped to look at him. "Why don't we just follow the directions we were given? It's all here. If we go left, right, right, forward, left, left, right," he said, ticking off the things on his list with his pencil, "we should be at the first station. Look!"

Oliver shoved the notepad under Blake's nose. The children crowded around Blake and Oliver to view the contents of the notepad while Ebon peered over Oliver's shoulder.

"See, Lady Jane said to follow the clues that we heard and we'd find our direction," said Oliver. "Vivianna told Lady Jane that she didn't know what direction to go and that she had nothing *left* and it wasn't *right*. Then Lady Jane agreed it wasn't *right* and said that *forward* was always the best direction to go. Then Vivianna explained that she *left* her husband alone for a few minutes. At that point, Lady Jane said there was nothing *left* to do except to notify the authorities, and then Vivianna said that she thought Lady Jane was *right*."

"Un-flipping-believable," whispered Blake. "You're a genius, Oliver."

Rafe gave Oliver a pat on the back. "I'm impressed."

"Augh," said Ebon. "I was so focused on the science, I failed to see the most obvious answer. Lady Jane told us to follow the clues that we *heard* and we would find our direction."

"It's mathematically possible in an intricately designed maze for every team to follow identical directions and arrive at the same spot," said Tahj. "It's also possible that there are different stations throughout the maze for each team. We have

no way of knowing at this moment, but I think Oliver is on to something.”

“I agree,” said Ebon with a defeated sigh.

Deidre sniffed. “Fine. He better be.”

“It’s settled then. We’ll follow the directions Oliver has written down. May I have your notepad to navigate with, Oliver?” asked Blake.

Oliver smiled and handed Blake his notepad.

“Okay, everyone listen up. We are going to move as quickly as possible through the maze without running. Deidre and I will lead the way. Get ready to move.”

The blast of an air horn pierced the air, and the leader of the knight troop shouted, “Knights, raise swords! Allow access!” The knights lifted their swords and arched them over each entrance.

Stooping underneath, Rafe’s team surged into the maze. The hard dirt trails were uneven, but surprisingly wide in most places, and the night sky was so bright that the students scarcely needed their electric lanterns.

Rafe fell into step with Baylor and Oliver as their team twisted through the maze. For the most part, the team remained unruffled as they scuttled past numerous passageways and dead ends filled with distractions, but occasionally, an apparition or a fiendish brute caught a few team members by surprise and slowed their progress.

The Royal Rangers sped along until they came to a shopping cart partially obstructing their path. As the youngsters squeezed past the cart in single file, Rafe took note of the white garbage bags stuffed into it.

“You know, that cart looks like the one Homeless Harriet Hobbs pushes around our campus,” said Baylor as she passed the obstruction.

Oliver sucked in his gut and slid around the cart. "I was thinking the same thing."

"Does she really not have a home?" asked Rafe, sidling past the cart.

"I'm not sure, but she's certainly down on her luck. She shows up on campus once a week and picks through the dumpsters behind the dormitories and cafeterias," replied Baylor.

"One more right turn and we'll be at the first station," said Oliver, crossing his fingers and his arms over his chest as they approached the next intersection.

Sure enough, when they rounded the next turn, the Royal Rangers found a green banner slung over a gated archway. It read: FIRST STATION/GREEN TEAM.

Oliver pumped his fists in the air. "Yes! I was right!"

The children hurried through the gate and entered a clearing lit by battery-powered lanterns. There, they found a pint-sized fellow dressed in a red leprechaun suit engaged in a heated argument with an older gentleman dressed to perfection.

"You're not part of this station," said the older man as he righted a toppled table and retrieved a CD player from the ground. "Go to the station to which you were assigned."

"I go where I want and I wish," said the strange little man in an Irish brogue as he waved a stout stick with a large knob at its end.

"Er—excuse me, Mr. Tucker," said Deidre. "Is there a problem?"

"Yes, Miss Dunn, there is something wrong here. I had just finished setting this station up and was waiting for your team to arrive when I smelled pipe smoke. I looked away from my table for one moment, and the next thing I know, this little charlatan appears in a swirl of dust, knocking over my table.

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The three operatic characters you see standing before you tumbled out of the discs as they hit the ground,” replied the harried teacher.

“He’s off his nut. ’Twas already dat way when I got ’ere. I ’ad nothin’ ta do with it,” said the little man, taking off his red hat and bowing. “I’m Seamus O’Shanahan and I’m a leprechaun, not a charlatan.”

Snapping to attention, the leprechaun stretched to his full three-and-half-foot height before yanking his elaborate red and gold jacket over his pudgy belly.

Rafe chewed the inside of his lip in order to squelch a smile as Seamus squirmed and shamelessly tugged at a wedgie in the backside of his breeches.

“Mr. Tucker,” said Deidre. “We need to solve this station as quickly as possible. Can you please tell us what we need to do here?”

“Yer quite rude and I don’t like ya,” said Seamus to Deidre. “Ya know, Miz Dumb, when ya meet a leprechaun, ’tis best ta be courteous and friendly.”

Deidre’s face turned an odd shade of red as she pressed her lips together in a furious frown. “That is *Dunn*, not *Dumb*,” she said, “and if you were really a leprechaun, you would know that they wear green, not red. Take your little walking stick and get to stepping.”

“’Tis a blackthorn shillelagh,” said Seamus. “’Tis a weapon, not a walkin’ stick, girlie. Would ya like me ta demonstrate?”

Baylor stepped between her cousin and the leprechaun before they came to blows. Crouching in front of the little fellow, Baylor slid off her feathered headdress and mask. “Seamus, is it? I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.” Baylor extended her hand and looked the leprechaun straight in the eye. “My name

is Baylor. My friends and I are in a real hurry, and we would be grateful for any help that you could give us."

Seamus regarded Baylor for a moment before taking her hand and gently kissing the back of it. A sly smile appeared on his face. "Yer lovely," he said, gazing into Baylor's eyes.

Deidre stamped her foot. "For crying out loud, we don't have time for this nonsense."

Mr. Tucker pointed the leprechaun to the exit with his finger. "You're right. We don't. These three famous opera characters have promised to go back into the CDs from which they spilled if even one of you children can identify their opera and its composer. They will each sing you an excerpt from a song in their opera, and if you identify all the operas' composers, you will receive a piece of fairy gold. If you correctly identify the names of *all* the operas, you will receive directions to your next station."

The leprechaun's ears perked up at the mention of gold, and he patted one of the leather pouches at his side. "So now ya understand me interest 'ere."

"The gold is for the children, not for you. Didn't I ask you to leave?" said Mr. Tucker.

"Didn't I ask ya ta leave?" mimicked Seamus.

Rafe was too busy looking at the three operatic figures in front of him to be too concerned about the leprechaun. He knew very little about operas, although he had reluctantly attended two with his parents when he was younger.

Mr. Tucker motioned for the male character attired as a professional eighteenth century gentleman to step forward. "Many people consider this to be the most popular comic opera of all-time," said Mr. Tucker, sounding as if he was conducting a class at the academy. "This man will sing a famous aria for you. He is the former servant of a count, but has managed to elevate his

status and join the ranks of one of the most respectable professions of his time. His former employer pays him for his assistance in wooing the lovely Rosine in this sidesplitting adventure.”

The gentleman stepped forward as if on cue and adjusted the collar at his throat. “Mi—mi—mi. Maestro if you will,” he said. Mr. Tucker snapped on some music.

A few bars of music played to introduce the song. Then the man flung out his arms and belted out, “Fi—ga—ro, Fi—ga—ro, Figaro, Figaro, Figaro, Figaro, Figaro, Fi—ga—ro!”

“*The Barber of Seville* by Gioachino Rossini,” said Baylor.

“A barber is a respected profession?” said Oliver. “I thought it would be a doctor or a lawyer. Is that true?”

Mr. Tucker stroked his chin and smiled at Oliver in amusement. “Yes, Mr. Harper. At one time, a barber was held in as high regard as any physician.”

Rafe exchanged glances with Baylor and whispered, “That was too easy. That song is so famous I’ve even heard it played in cartoons.”

Next, Mr. Tucker presented a woman wearing a long gown in shades of midnight blue and black, holding a dagger in one hand and a long scepter with a huge star at the end in the other. A long black veil with quivering stars attached to the back of a high silver-blue headdress cascaded down her back.

“This dramatic opera features *The Queen of the Night*,” said Mr. Tucker. “The queen’s daughter, Pamina, has been taken by the high priest, Sarastro, who wants to remove the girl from her mother’s dark influence and have Pamina join the other worshippers of dawn.

“The queen sends Prince Tamino and a hunter to rescue her daughter, arming them with several enchanted items. When Pamina and Tamino both decide to embrace the beliefs of the

high priest, the queen is infuriated. In one of the most memorable arias in opera history, the queen appears to her daughter and insists that she murder the high priest. Of course, Pamina does not comply, and, at the end of the opera, dawn comes and darkness is dispelled.”

Rafe couldn't have been more thrilled to hear the opera's description. He was certain it was one of the operas that his parents had taken him to when he was younger, but he wanted to hear the song to be sure.

The queen clutched the knife dramatically to her chest as the music started. “Ha—ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha. Ha—ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.” The queen sang in perfect pitch, her voice quickly and impressively covering two octaves.

"I've heard that song," whispered Baylor. "I think it's Mozart, but I don't know the name of the opera."

“Relax. I got this one,” said Rafe. “That song is from *The Magic Flute* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.”

"Correct," replied Mr. Tucker.

Rafe's team clapped and congratulated him. Parker seemed appropriately impressed with Rafe's knowledge and rewarded him with one of her incredible smiles.

“Good work, but the last opera will prove to be the most difficult,” said the teacher as he stepped to the side of the final costumed figure.

The character lifted her shoulders and faced the children wearing a gorgeous white-feathered gown and tiara. Looking like magnificent wings, her arms danced a fluid ballet.

“In this opera, two jealous sisters betray their youngest sister who has married a Tsar and given birth to a son. The bitter sisters have thrown the prince and his mother into a barrel and then into the sea, hoping to drown them, but they wash up on

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a remote island. There, the prince rescues a glorious swan-bird from certain death,” said Mr. Tucker, resting his hand on the woman’s shoulder as she fluttered her wings.

“The prince becomes homesick and wishes to visit his father, the Tsar. The swan-bird turns the prince into an insect so that he may safely stow away on a ship. At the end of the opera, the swan-bird transforms into a beautiful princess. The prince and princess marry and live happily ever after.”

Audra sighed from the back of the group. Sully fluttered his hand over his heart again, and Audra rolled her eyes in irritation.

“While I am sure that your entire group will be familiar with this music,” said Mr. Tucker, “I am not so sure anyone here will know the name of this opera.”

The music started and continued at such a frantic pace that it often sounded like buzzing. Undeterred by the speed of the song, the swan-bird sang her part in perfect Russian.

Just as Mr. Tucker predicted, even the non-musicians in the group were easily able to identify the song as “The Flight of the Bumblebee.”

“I played ‘The Flight of the Bumblebee’ for my violin teacher earlier this year, so I know it was written by Rimsky-Korsakov,” said Baylor.

“Well done! You were able to pinpoint all the composers of these operas. Your team has earned the fairy gold,” said Mr. Tucker. “Now, if someone can identify the name of the opera, I can provide your group with directions to the next station in the maze.”

Baylor looked at her twin and shook her head from side to side. “I’m sorry. I just don’t know.”

“I don’t know, either,” whispered Rafe.

Deidre’s eyes bulged and she looked as if she might have a

seizure. "I thought you said Baylor knew everything about music. Now we're sunk at the first station," she said.

"Wait," said Audra from the back of the group. "There is a romantic fairy-tale poem written by a Russian author that sounds very similar to the story we just heard."

"Many operas are based on poems and stories," said Mr. Tucker. "Do you remember the name of the poem?"

"Of course I do. It's called *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*."

"Congratulations!" cried Mr. Tucker. "Your team has earned the gold and the directions to the next station."

The Royal Rangers erupted with excitement. They embraced and slapped one another on the back in congratulations.

Blake kissed Audra on the cheek as he picked her up and twirled her around several times. When he set her back on her feet, Sully picked her up and whirled her around some more.

Deidre tilted her chin in the air. "It's lucky for everyone that I put Audra on my team."

Mr. Tucker smiled at the children and produced a sheet of printed instructions and one gold coin from his pocket.

Seamus stretched out his arm and opened his palm. "I'll take da gold," he said.

"Before you start salivating, Mr. O'Shanahan, the gold is not real, and it's not for you," said Mr. Tucker.

"Obviously, me sources ern't what dey use ta be," snorted the leprechaun. "Gather yer tings and let's be off."

Deidre confronted Seamus as he moved towards the exit. "I hope you don't think you're coming with us."

"I go where I want and I wish, missy, and 'twill take a better person dan ya ta stop me."

Deidre started to snarl a reply, but Blake stopped her. "We don't have time for this, remember?"

Blake collected the directions and gold piece from Mr. Tucker before leading the Royal Rangers back into the maze. Seamus followed closely behind.

Turning the first corner to get to the next station, the children startled a woman carrying an armful of corn, and she dropped it all on the ground.

"Thank goodness I've run into someone," said the lady, kneeling to retrieve her corn. "I've lost my cart."

The old woman looked downright shoddy, her face smudged with dirt and parched pieces of cornhusks jutting every which way from her wild grey hair. She wore several layers of dirty sweaters with a pockmarked plaid skirt. Thick, twisted stockings sagged down her spindly legs.

"Good grief! Homeless Harriet looks even dirtier than usual, and she's been picking the corn. That is strictly against the rules," said Deidre.

Baylor gave her cousin a stern look and mouthed the word, "Stop."

"Mrs. Hobbs, this corn isn't good for you to eat," said Baylor as she stooped next to the woman. "The farmer is going to feed this corn to his cows. It's not for people."

"But I'm hungry, dear, and there's plenty of it here. I don't think the cows will mind if I have a little," said Harriet, struggling to get to her feet again.

"We need to go, Blake. If anyone sees us with the corn she's picked, we'll get thrown out of the maze for sure," said Deidre.

Blake placed his hand on Homeless Harriet's elbow and helped her stand up. "Deidre's right. We have to go now, but we'll come back and help you get out of the maze later."

"No, we won't because I'm not leaving her here by herself and that's that," Baylor said. "I'll find a knight to help her. You

can give me the directions to the next station, and I'll meet you there."

"Fine, but only if someone else goes with you," said Blake, scribbling on a piece of paper from Oliver's notebook and handing it to his sister. "There shouldn't be any more music questions so take Rafe with you."

The leprechaun pointed his shillelagh at Rafe. "What er ya, daft? 'E will get lost. I'll go with 'er," squawked Seamus.

"No offense, Mr. Leprechaun, but I'd feel more comfortable if Rafe went with my sister."

"I can't believe you're separating the group," said Deidre. "We better not lose because of this."

Ignoring his cousin's rant, Blake set off down the pathway, motioning the rest of the group to follow him.

Seamus glared at Rafe. "Come on, love. We don't need dat eejit. I know where ta find ya a knight."

"Did you just call me an idiot?" asked Rafe.

"We actually *do* need him, Seamus, because every lady should have an escort," said Baylor. "You'll be mine, and Rafe will be Mrs. Hobbs."

Seamus' face brightened and Homeless Harriet looked tickled as well. The leprechaun gathered himself to his full height and offered Baylor his hand, which she took without hesitation.

"It has been such a long time since I've had an escort," said Homeless Harriet, seizing Rafe's arm.

Rafe wasn't sure how he felt about being an escort, but, fortunately, he didn't have too much time to think about it since Seamus was guiding them through the maze as if he'd designed it himself.

When they passed the tractor bench, they heard a cacophonous snoring. Rafe and Baylor peered around the corner of one

of the passageways to see five little lads dressed in green leprechaun outfits piled in a heap on the ground. They appeared to be sleeping soundly.

"I don't remember passing them before, but this is the way we came," said Rafe.

"What er ya, blind? Dey were der," Seamus said, glowering at Rafe.

Rafe puckered his brow. He was sure the sleeping boys had not been on the floor of that passageway when the Royal Rangers made their first pass through the corn maze, but he didn't feel like arguing the point with the persnickety leprechaun.

"Would you look at those sweet boys?" said Homeless Harriet. She pushed past Rafe and Baylor and tried to lie down next to the boys. "I could really do with a nap myself."

"Oh no, not now, Mrs. Hobbs," said Baylor, stopping the old woman by placing her arms around her waist and holding her upright. "We need to keep going." When Baylor was sure Homeless Harriet's legs weren't going to buckle again, she let go of the woman's waist.

"Ya can't go gettin' sidetracked by a bunch of fraudulent leprechauns," said Seamus. He stomped one of his black buckled shoes indignantly. "Look at der hats and der shoes. Der nothin' but shameless impersonators."

Rafe had to admit that the leprechaun had a point. The boys did not make convincing leprechauns. Their white sneakers were adorned with glistening green shamrocks and their plastic hats were covered with so much green glitz that it looked like they had just come from an explosion in a glitter factory.

Baylor took Homeless Harriet by the hand and led her past the sleeping boys. When the little group made the next turn, they saw a knight pushing Homeless Harriet's cart towards an exit.

"Der's yer knight," said Seamus.

"That's mine!" exclaimed Homeless Harriet, rushing towards her cart.

"The knight can help you out of the maze, Mrs. Hobbs," said Baylor.

Homeless Harriet eyed the knight, as she rummaged through her cart.

Pulling a fragment of paper out of his pocket, the knight smiled at the children. "Tonight, kindness is not its own reward. I have something to compensate you for your trouble."

"There's no payment necessary," said Baylor.

The knight pushed the scrap of paper into her hand and recited a verse:

*"You need to know this at the end of the maze.
Find two more clues and you'll see through the haze.
I can tell you no more, so don't even ask.
Run along now so your team won't be last."*

After reciting his verse, the knight tried to help Homeless Harriet push her cart over the dirt pathway, but she was having none of it. She swatted his hands away and powered the cart out of the maze while giving the young knight the tongue-lashing of his life.



Chapter Eight

The Hidden Stations

As Homeless Harriet's voice faded into the distance, Rafe and Baylor looked at the torn piece of paper the knight had handed to them. Written in capital letters across the page were the words:

TO RELEASE THE MAN FROM THE FAIRY'S SPELL,

"I have no idea what this is, but we don't have time to think about it. We need to get back to the second station before Blake kills us." Baylor fished around in her pocket for the directions Blake had given her.

"Ya don't need dat paper," said Seamus. "Follow me."

Baylor lowered herself to her knees and looked Seamus squarely in the eyes. "Do you promise that you can get us to the next station as soon as possible without having to follow these directions?"

The leprechaun returned her gaze without flinching. "I do," he said.

"Then lead the way."

Seamus set off down a path, and Rafe and Baylor hurried close behind him.

"Why are you always getting down on your knees to talk to the little fellow?" whispered Rafe.

"I think Seamus has done a lot of research on playing the role of a leprechaun tonight. I have several books about leprechauns

and fairies at home. The books state that a leprechaun is bound by fairy law to always tell you the truth, so long as you do him the courtesy of looking directly into his eyes.”

“I can only hope Seamus is as well-read as you are.”

“I know, right?” said Baylor. She poked Rafe in the ribs and skipped ahead to walk next to Seamus.

Rafe heard peals of laughter coming from a narrow passageway they had just passed. Interest piqued, he leaned backwards to take a quick look. To his surprise, he saw four small children petting an enormous sterling-blue Great Dane at the end of a dead-end passage. As the dog delivered sloppy licks to each of their faces, they laughed.

Rafe knew he should keep up with Baylor and Seamus, but the children looked to be only four or five years of age, far too young to be in the maze on their own. He’d never have a clean conscience if one of them got hurt because he walked away.

“Oy, guys! Are you lost?” he called.

The children clapped their hands over their mouths and stared at Rafe in surprise. “Go away,” said one of the little tots, pulling his hand away from his face and slapping the dog hard on the rump.

The startled Great Dane bolted. Rafe barely had time to straighten up and shout a warning to Baylor and Seamus before the huge dog charged past him, leash dragging.

“Janey Mack! Even da animals er off der nut around 'ere!” bellowed Seamus as he jumped out of the way and watched the dog speed out of view.

Rafe stepped into the passageway to round up the little rascals, but the tots had disappeared. He didn’t see any trampled corn or any paths they could have used to escape. How could four small children vanish from a dead-end passage without a trace?

"There you are, Hercules," said a female voice from around the corner. "Hercules, stop! Hercules . . . Oh, no!"

Rafe heard scuffling sounds, a loud thump, and the cracking and snapping of cornstalks.

"Ouch," the voice moaned as Rafe and Baylor hurried towards the noise.

Upon arriving, they saw a plump, middle-aged lady pulling herself into a sitting position amidst some broken cornstalks alongside the trail.

"Oh my goodness. That's one of our math teachers," said Baylor, rushing to the woman's side. "Mrs. Marshall, are you okay?"

The teacher made a face. "I may have twisted my ankle," she said. "I don't know what got into my dog."

"That was *your* dog?" asked Rafe.

"Yes. He's only a year old and still very much a puppy, I'm afraid. Would you children mind helping me over to that bench?"

"No problem," said Rafe, helping the woman to her feet. "I just saw some children playing with your dog. They looked too young to be left alone, but they disappeared back into the maze before I could get to them."

"I wouldn't worry," replied Mrs. Marshall as she limped to the bench with the children's assistance. "There are all sorts of creatures in the maze tonight, and they're all under a great deal of supervision."

Seamus took one of his stubby fingers and tapped the watch on Rafe's wrist.

"If you should see Hercules, please grab his leash and take him to the nearest knight," said Mrs. Marshall. She took a slip of paper from her pocket and handed it to Baylor. "You'll need to find one last clue in order to solve the maze, and you will not

find it by answering any of the riddles at the regular stations. Remember, if you find Hercules, take him to a knight.”

“I don’t feel right about leaving you when you’re hurt,” said Baylor.

Mrs. Marshall rose from the bench and stood on both her feet, her hands resting on each of her plump hips as she spoke in rhyme:

*“You will need to know this at the end of the maze.
Find one more clue and you’ll see through the haze
I can tell you no more, so don’t even ask.
Run along now so your team won’t be last.”*

“Dis is gettin’ ridiculous,” said Seamus. He rolled his eyes and stalked off.

Bidding the teacher goodbye, the children trailed after the leprechaun.

“Look at this,” said Baylor. “The torn edges of the paper that the knight gave me fit perfectly with the piece of paper Mrs. Marshall handed to me.”

Baylor held the scraps of paper together and Rafe read the clue out loud.

TO RELEASE THE MAN FROM THE FAIRY’S SPELL,
BURY THE ANSWER UN-

“I think I know what’s going on,” she said.

“You do? I don’t see how. There’s a word cut in half.”

“I’m not talking about the clue. I’m talking about Mrs. Marshall and Homeless Harriet. I think they’re part of a hidden station meant to test us on the refinement portion of our school motto.”

“How do you figure that?”

"Lady Jane gave a series of assemblies last week devoted to the importance of lending a helping hand to others who are less fortunate than ourselves. We know that Homeless Harriet didn't *accidentally* wander into this maze because of the clue the knight gave us, and we know that Mrs. Marshall wasn't *really* hurt because she gave us another clue when we helped her over to the bench. I'm positive that if we find her dog and give him to a knight, we'll get the last clue."

Rafe nodded. "Apparently we're going to need it to solve the maze."

"More walkin' and less talkin'!" called Seamus over his shoulder. "Yer friends ern't waitin' fer ya at da second station. Der already at da next one. I'll 'ave ta take ya der."

"What? How do you know that?" asked Baylor.

"I 'ave me ways."

"But we don't have directions to the third station," said Rafe.

"'Tis a good ting yer not leadin' da way den."

Seamus moved the children along at a dizzying pace. They'd lost considerable time helping Mrs. Marshall, but the leprechaun seemed determined to help them make it up. In fact, they were walking so briskly that they nearly collided with the rest of their team when they emerged from beneath a banner that read: STATION THREE/GREEN TEAM.

Baylor explained how she and Rafe had stumbled across a hidden station in the maze. "Mrs. Marshall told us we need one more clue in order to solve the final puzzle," she said, "and we'll need to find her dog, Hercules, to do it."

"That may be true, Bay, but we'll look for the dog after we solve the last two stations. Right now, I need you and Rafe to stay with the team."

Baylor nodded her head, but as soon as Blake turned his

back, she knelt in front of the leprechaun and whispered something in his ear. Rafe couldn't hear what she said, but he saw Seamus nod and strike off in the opposite direction.

"Where did he go?"

"Blake said you and I had to stay with the team. He didn't say anything about *Seamus* having to stay with the team, so I asked him to look for Hercules."

"Clever," said Rafe as the two of them fell into step with Tahj and Oliver.

"What did we miss at the other stations, Tahj?" Baylor asked.

Her question was just the opening Tahj needed to begin jabbering about the second station. The chemistry teacher had "accidentally" dropped a tray containing a slide rule, a beaker, and a telescope. A famous mathematician, chemist, and physicist appeared. The scientists insisted that the group recall their names and solve certain equations for which the scientists had been famous. Ebon and Tahj solved all the equations, and the team had received another piece of fairy gold as a prize.

Then Oliver went on at length about how he had single-handedly solved the third station and showed Rafe a jar of buttermilk to prove it. The station had been devoted to three famous paintings. A woman in a red dress, a sleepy village, and a party of musketeers had come to life from each of the paintings and had refused to go back into the frames until the name of the paintings and their painters were identified.

The art teacher had dropped the hint that the titles of the paintings all had the word "night" in common, but Oliver didn't need any help. He'd recognized each work of art. The first painting was *Nighthawks* by Edward Hopper. The second was *Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh, and the third was *Night Watch* by Rembrandt van Rijn.

By the end of Oliver's soliloquy, the team was standing in front of the fourth station, where they saw three of the sports coaches from Ryder-Knight Academy. They waved the children back, looking quite distressed.

The soccer coach tried to block the children's view of the station with his body. "Oh no, no, no . . . the students are here!"

"Avert your eyes, young ladies." The track coach peeled off his jacket and wrapped it around the lower half of a naked man's torso. The soccer and baseball coaches offered their jackets, too, and the track coach tied them into a short skirt around the figure.

With the figure looking sufficiently modest, the three coaches stepped aside, revealing a human statue of a young man in the pose of a tightly wound discus thrower, his body coated with bronze paint.

"Is this another art station?" asked Oliver. "That guy is posed exactly like Myron's famous bronze sculpture, *Discobolus*."

"Afraid not, kid. We were late getting this station set up," said the soccer coach. "As we were rushing around here, trying to get things ready for you, the other coaches and I accidentally rammed into each other with our equipment bags. The next thing we knew, these three smart-alecks were standing here, and they're refusing to leave unless you students can answer their questions."

"That seems to be the theme of the night," said Blake. "What are we playing for at this station?"

"We have an assortment of laurel wreathes, and if you answer the bonus question, your team will receive directions to the fifth and final station."

Rafe studied the menagerie of sports characters in front of him. In addition to the partially clothed bronze statue posed like

a discus thrower, a soccer player in baggy shorts with cleats and shin guards bounced a soccer ball from one knee to the other, while a helmeted baseball player practiced his swings.

"The statue is up first," said the baseball coach. "I can't wait to get rid of this knucklehead."

"I am an ancient Greek Olympian and, as such, I competed in the nude. I fail to see the big deal," said the statue.

Ebon nodded. "That is, in fact, true."

The baseball coach glared at the statue. "Yeah? You better hope you find a way to make it back to ancient Greece tonight, Mr. Smartmouth, or you'll be having detention in Maine for the next two months. Ask your question and get out of here."

"Fine by me," replied the statue. "There was only one game played in ancient Greece from the first to the thirteenth Olympiads. What was the name of the race?"

"Hey, I know this one," said Sully in amazement. "It was a two hundred yard dash called the Stadion Race."

The statue straightened out of his pose, placed his hands on either side of his back and arched his stiff spine. "You're up next buddy," he said, slapping the soccer player on the back. "I'm out of here." The statue walked into the cornfield, loincloth of jackets flapping against his thighs.

The soccer player grinned. "That's a hard act to follow, so I'll just get right to it. What country has won the most World Cup tournaments, and has played in every tournament since the World Cup began in 1930?"

"Easy. It's Brazil," said Blake. "Next question, please."

The baseball player stopped swinging his bat and turned to face the team of children. "Let's see if I can stump you. What sport used the term 'home run' long before it was used in baseball?" he asked, leaning on his bat.

"Only one of the most popular sports in India," said Tahj. "Cricket."

"Way to go, Green Team," praised the track coach. "You've earned yourselves three flowered wreathes in record time."

The soccer coach and the baseball coach stepped forward and placed garlands on the heads of the three boys who had answered the questions.

"Your group has one more question to answer in order to get directions to the next station," said the baseball coach. "In what year was the first Olympiad held?"

Blake's eyes canvassed the group and came to rest on Ebon. "Don't you know the answer?" he asked.

"Of course, I do," Ebon said. "I was being polite and giving someone else the opportunity to participate, but since no one else seems to know, I'll do the honors. The answer is seven hundred seventy-six B.C."

"Congratulations," said the baseball coach, handing a sheet of directions to the children. "You have one more station to solve. Good luck."

As the team began to depart for the next station, a shadow darted out of the sky and landed on one of the scarecrows holding the banner for station number four. It was Simon, the red-tailed hawk.

"What is that nuisance doing here?" asked Deidre.

"You know the bird follows Baylor everywhere," said Blake. He took his cousin's arm and pushed her ahead of himself on the trail. "I'm surprised he hasn't showed up before now."

Moving towards the next station, the children heard a sudden loud commotion on the path behind them.

Seamus had found, not only Hercules, but Leopold as well. Dragging the leprechaun by his britches, Hercules cavorted

down the path carrying Seamus' shillelagh in his mouth while Leopold gleefully matched Hercules' stride toting a strange silver branch with tiny silver apples.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" screamed Seamus. He skidded to a stop in front of Baylor and Rafe. Rafe grabbed Hercules' leash, and Baylor helped the leprechaun to his feet.

"Thank you, Seamus. You're wonderful!" cried Baylor.

"I know I am," said Seamus. He dusted his bottom off with his hand and took the silver stick out of Leopold's mouth. "Da fairies were trying ta lure da animals inta der realm. Yer lucky I found dem."

"Well cousins, now that we have all your pets in the maze, perhaps you'd like to add a few butterflies," Deidre snapped.

"Knock it off, Deidre," said Blake. "We all need to keep walking. As soon as we pass another knight, we'll hand the dog off and, hopefully, get the last clue."

The team fell into line behind Blake and, two short paths later, reached the fifth and final station.

Rafe was thrilled to see two Knights of the Corn positioned at the entrance gate and handed the Great Dane over to one of them.

The knight passed a fragment of paper to Rafe and recited a rhyme:

*"Don't look at it now.
Look at it later.
Then you will find your
Reward will be greater."*

"Thanks," said Rafe, stuffing the clue into his pocket and following the others into the last station.

"For crying out loud, all of you get back into your books

right now. Can you believe this?" asked a distraught young man as Rafe joined the group. "Miss Ford, the literature teacher, asked me to bring these novels into the corn maze for her, but I accidentally tipped the wheelbarrow over, and these characters got knocked out of their books. They're refusing to go back in until I can tell them which book they fell out of and who wrote it. I would appreciate it if you guys would help me get them back into their books. I'll even give you some super-duper special honey cakes. What do you say?"

The children nodded their agreement and looked around the station. A little girl in a checkered shirt, overalls, and sneakers held a tiny piglet wrapped in a blanket. The piglet slurped on a bottle full of milk as the girl babbled sweetly to it.

A blond haired, barefoot boy wearing suspenders and pants a few inches too short for him stood a few yards from the little girl. Crouched next to the boy was a man who looked like a farmer. He held a gun in one hand and was studying an animal track on the ground near the boy.

Most fascinating of all was a withered old woman wearing an ancient yellowed wedding dress and missing one shoe. Seated at a table in front of a fake wooden fireplace with a broken clock on the mantle, the woman shuffled a deck of cards. A once grand wedding cake disintegrated on the table in front of her.

The little girl feeding the pig spoke up. "I'm Fern Arable and this little runt's name is Wilbur. He is one terrific pig. Wilbur lives in our barn with all the other animals. His best friend in the whole world is a spider."

"That's all we get?" asked Deidre.

"That's all we need," said Parker. "It was my favorite book when I was growing up. It's *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White."

"That's correct," boomed a voice behind them. The children

turned to find Miss Ford had finally made an appearance. "We've got quite a mess here, haven't we? What happened, Teddy?"

"It's complicated," replied the boy who had dumped the wheelbarrow, "but I've got some help, and we'll have these people back in their books in no time at all."

"Excuse me," said the character resembling Daniel Boone. "I'm Ezra Baxter and this is my son, Jody. I am looking for a bear named Old Slewfoot who has been attacking my livestock. My son has a pet fawn named Flag, and we saw both of them enter this cornfield."

"Please tell me there isn't a bear loose in this cornfield," whispered Oliver, wringing his hands.

"This particular novel also won the 1939 Pulitzer Prize," said Miss Ford. "Does anyone remember the name of this book?"

"*The Yearling*," said Tahj uncertainly.

"Yes, you're absolutely right," said Audra, "and it was written by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings.

"I'm astounded. Someone besides Audra actually retained some information from my literature classes," said Miss Ford, looking pleased. "Now, let's go on to our last character. Miss Havisham is a lonely old woman sitting in her ruined mansion. She was swindled out of her money by her fiancé, who left her at twenty minutes to nine on her wedding day. Miss Havisham is waiting to play cards with her adopted daughter Estella and a boy named Pip."

Audra waved her hand as if she were in class, and Miss Ford acknowledged her with a smile.

"I knew you'd know this one, Audra. Tell me."

"*Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens."

"Congratulations, Royal Rangers!" said Miss Ford. "Your team has completed the corn maze.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The team clapped and cheered as they hugged and patted each other on the backs. When they regained their composure, they realized that Miss Ford, as well as all the characters from the books, had disappeared. Even the young man with the wheelbarrow was gone.



Chapter Nine

The Fairy Mound

“**W**here did dey go?” asked Seamus as he nosed around the station. He poked his head behind the fireplace and stabbed the corn with his shillelagh.

“Did we win or not?” asked Oliver.

Rafe pointed to a woven basket next to the petrified wedding cake on the table in front of the fireplace. “I don’t think we’re done solving this station yet.”

The students gathered around the tabletop to examine the basket. It contained two items— a golden bell and a roll of paper tied with a scarlet ribbon.

Blake unrolled the scroll and began to read it out loud.

*“Your final answer must be found
And given at the fairy’s mound.*

*You need but answer true and wise
When she doth ask where beauty lies.*

*The answer will be very clear
From the clues you’re given here.*

*This metal has a stinging prick,
But at this end, you’ll find no stick.*

*If your aim should hit this center,
Winner’s circle you will enter.*

*For though a storm cannot be bound,
Here tranquility can be found.
From this dimple a root doth sprout.
Give your answer, have no doubt.
A leprechaun on you has spied.
Now take his hand and he will guide."*

"What? Let me see dat," said Seamus, yanking the scroll out of Blake's hands and looking genuinely surprised.

Baylor squatted in front of Seamus and looked into his blue eyes. "Do you know where to find the fairy mound?"

"I do," said the leprechaun, "but, trust me, ya don't want ta go der."

"We do, Seamus," said Baylor. "We have to go there to solve the maze."

"Fine," said the leprechaun, jabbing the roll of paper back into Blake's hands, "but only because I've got da silver bough."

"And that does what?" said Rafe.

"Da silver bough allows da person holdin' it ta enter and exit da fairy realm without incident," replied Seamus. "Ya can use da fake gold, flowers, and food ta distract most of da fairies from mischief, but da queen will be a different story."

"Wait," said Blake. "I haven't read the last verse on this scroll yet."

"Read it already," said Deidre impatiently.

*"If you have assisted those that were hidden,
Read the clue now, and do what is bidden."*

"Baylor and I did that and I've got those clues," said Rafe. He pulled the last clue out of his pocket and handed it to Baylor.

She pieced the clues together and read the rhyme for the rest of the team.

TO RELEASE THE MAN FROM THE FAIRY'S SPELL,
BURY THE ANSWER UNDER THE BELL.

"So, evidently, we have to find some fairies, solve a riddle, and then bury something underneath the bell in this basket," said Tahj, picking up the bell and giving it a jangle.

"Dat makes sense. Fairies of da Sidhe don't like bells," said Seamus.

"The answers to the clues in those rhymes are ridiculously simple," Ebon said. "The clues are all talking about eyes . . . the eye of a needle, a bull's eye, the eye of a storm, and the eye of a potato."

"Then I think it's safe to assume that we need to find some sort of an eye and bury it under this bell," said Blake. "Okay, Seamus, you need to get us to the fairy mound. We'll figure out the rest when we get there."

Seamus heaved a great sigh and tightened his grip on his shillelagh. "I'm tellin' ya, 'tisn't a good idea. Fairies er very erratic creatures."

"We'll find the way ourselves then," said Deidre. "I'm not keen to follow a senseless moron who couldn't find his way out of a paper bag."

Seamus glared at Deidre. "Yer not very good at makin' friends, er ya? Ya need ta learn some manners, or keep yer trap shut."

"She won't say another word," promised Blake, covering Deidre's mouth with his hand. "Which way do we go?"

"While ya were all standin' around waggin' yer chins, I found a shortcut behind dat fireplace. Push it aside."

Sully and Rand slid the fireplace to one side, revealing two oak trees strung with jack-o-lanterns and bony skeletons. Framed by the spooky arbor, a hill rose from the meadow ahead of the children. Some ten feet in height, its sloping sides culminated in a long flat top. A shallow two-foot trench had been dug all the way around the mound, separating the team from the little hill.

Outlined against the full moon, a gorgeous winged woman stood at the top of the mound, her gauzy attire glistening in the moonlight.

"She must be the fairy queen," whispered Oliver.

"Get yer gifts ready," said Seamus.

Blake held the bell by its clapper, removed it from the basket he carried, and concealed it behind his back. Then the other students placed the prizes they had won into the basket and crept towards the fairy queen.

When they reached the edge of the mound, seven winged sprites playing wooden flutes danced into view. A man in a pirate costume followed them, wearing a tri-corner hat embellished with a peacock feather. He appeared to be in a trance, mesmerized by the beautiful woman at the top of the mound.

"Lady Jane said to look for a naval officer, not a pirate," said Ebon.

"Da fairies probably dressed em like dat. Dey like der sailors rough around da edges," whispered Seamus.

"What do we do now?" asked Blake.

"We ring da doorbell," said Seamus, shaking the silver branch and causing the little silver apples to plink melodically.

The fairy music stopped and everyone on the mound turned towards the children, except the pirate, who continued to be enraptured by the fairy queen.

“Who goes there? Identify yourselves,” said one of the fairy maidens.

“Just a solitary leprechaun and a few friends,” said Seamus. “Ta be brutally honest with ya, most of dem er merely acquaintances.”

“What business do you have here?” asked another fairy.

Blake stepped to the leprechaun’s side. “We’re looking for a man who seems to have gone missing this afternoon. Perhaps you’ve seen him.”

Seamus rubbed the back of his neck and frowned as the fairy queen floated down the hill, coming to rest beside the pirate. The queen tapped two of the fairies on the shoulder. Crossing the trench, the little pixies approached the children.

“Oh, and we’ve brought some gifts,” said Blake, handing the basket to the nearest fairy.

“What a coincidence. We brought gifts, as well,” boomed an unfamiliar voice with a lilting Irish accent.

“Finn MacAllister,” said Seamus. “What er ya doin’?”

Snapping his head around, Rafe saw another leprechaun leading the Thunder Stars towards the mound. The other leprechaun was dressed the same as Seamus, right down to the two leather pouches around his waist.

“I was paid ta bring dem 'ere,” said Finn, digging into one of the pouches.

“If dey paid ya in gold, yer sure ta be disappointed,” said Seamus.

Finn produced a twenty-dollar bill from one of his pouches and waved it in the air. “I’ve learned to take da currency of whatever country I 'appen ta be in at da time. It 'elps buy me way out of tight situations.”

“Janey Mack!” exclaimed Seamus. “What kind of a leprechaun er ya, man?”

"A practical one," replied Finn.

The fairies snatched the second basket, too, and hopped back over the trench to share their bounty. As Seamus had predicted, the little fairies soon became so absorbed with their new treasures, they lost interest in the pirate and their queen.

Finn stared at the fairy mound. "What's going on, Seamus?"

Seamus shook his head at the other leprechaun. "I don't know. 'Tis a fairy mound ta be sure, but dey ern't real fairies."

Deidre rolled her eyes, "Duh."

The fairy queen walked to the edge of the trench and spoke to the students in rhyme.

*"You think you have been so clever,
But I'll prevail now and ever.*

*For in this man true beauty lies.
I found him at the Bridge of Sighs.*

*And you will never lift this curse,
Unless you first complete this verse.*

*As this night grows older and older,
True beauty lies . . ."*

"In the eye of the beholder!" shouted Blake and the captain of the Thunder Stars at the same time.

The fairy queen looked unimpressed with their answer, and, just as Rafe began to think the answer had been wrong, the fairy queen spoke another rhyme.

*"That answer is correct,
But there is something you neglect.*

*Unless you know what to bury,
He is mine and we will marry."*

The Royal Rangers clustered together in a panic and began to whisper to one another, as did the Thunder Stars.

Ebon's eyes scoured the mound's surface. "I have examined the fairy mound and its occupants, and I am flummoxed. I don't see a sewing implement, or a wooden eye, or even a potato with an eye that we could bury."

"It's okay," Blake said. "The answer is right in front of us someplace. We just have to think of it before the Thunder Stars do."

Rafe studied the clothing of the fairy queen and the pirate. Maybe there was a hook-and-eye used to fasten their garments. No, their clothing was fastened with laces. *So much for that theory.*

"Oh, my goodness," Baylor said in a whispery gasp as her eyes widened. "Blake, each of the round spots on the tail feathers of a peacock is called an eye. It's the feather. We have to bury the feather from the pirate's hat."

Blake smiled at his sister. "Go get it," he said softly. "I'll dig a hole."

Baylor prepared to hop over the trench, but Seamus stopped her, pointing to some toadstools surrounding the trench. "Da fairies may not be real, but da fairy ring *is*, love. I'll go for ya. I got da silver bough."

Seamus jumped the trench and grabbed the feather off the pirate's hat with such speed the pirate didn't even blink. Then he leapt the divide again and handed the peacock feather to Baylor, who dropped it into Blake's hastily dug hole and covered it with dirt.

Blake placed the bell on top of the buried feather and lifted his hands in the air. "Done!" he shouted.

"No!" shrieked the fairy queen.

A dense layer of vapor began to whirl around the pirate, and wild Celtic music filled the frosty air.

Oliver hopped up and down. "They must have every fog machine in the theatre department here tonight."

As the thick layer of mist began to dissipate, both teams saw that the fairy queen had disappeared, and the pirate had been transformed into a handsome young man wearing a white naval uniform.

With a joyous cry, Vivianna ran out of the darkness and greeted her husband with a passionate kiss. Lady Jane and Esmeralda followed, emerging from the haze with the fairy queen and her court. Joining hands, the actors bowed as the children clapped and whistled their appreciation.

"What a romantic finale," sighed Audra.

"Well done!" shouted Lady Jane over the music as the actors began to applaud the children. "Congratulations, Royal Rangers! You have saved Jack Morgan, and your team has won the trip to Paris!"

Lady Jane lifted her arm high in the air and blew three short blasts on the air horn in her hand.



Chapter Ten

The Blue Star

The Royal Rangers erupted, jumping, dancing, and screaming in delight. Their team had just won a two-week, all-expenses paid trip to Paris, France, and they couldn't be more ecstatic!

The Thunder Stars clapped as they watched the Royal Rangers' rowdy celebration, but their dejected expressions told a different story.

As the merriment died down, the leprechaun pressed a kiss to the back of Baylor's hand. "Farewell, me lovely."

Baylor bent and kissed the leprechaun on his cheek. "Goodnight, Seamus. You've been wonderful."

The leprechaun scuffed one of his shoes and blushed before shuffling off towards the maze. "Take care of the girlie, eejit!" said Seamus, thumping Rafe on the shin with his shillelagh.

Rafe bent to rub the knot on the front of his leg and froze when he heard a low rumble of thunder. He felt the gooseflesh rising on his arms as he watched the wind surge in blustery waves across the cornfield. Rafe puckered his brow and his stomach flip-flopped. "Aw, come on! Not again!" he whispered.

Out of nowhere, a jagged bolt of lightning speared the ground inside the corn maze, illuminating the entire field. The children gaped in surprise, and an alarmed murmur rippled through their group.

Shocked, Baylor stumbled backwards, bumping into Rafe's chest. "I smell smoke," she whispered.

Flaring his nostrils, Rafe caught a distinct whiff of smoke, too. He waved at his grandmother to get her attention, and she paced towards him, a cellphone pressed to her ear. Behind her, a white plume of smoke spiraled skyward from the inside of the corn maze.

"Turn the lights on at once," she said into the phone. "What do you mean the lights aren't working? I have children, staff, and chaperones in this maze. No excuses. Do it."

Lady Jane listened to the frantic voice on the other end of the phone and her eyes widened. Snapping her phone shut, she closed her eyes and pressed it to her chest. His grandmother was rarely rattled, but Rafe could see she was desperately trying to compose herself.

The nearby floodlights hummed and flickered on and off for several moments, but finally blinked on to stay. A voice boomed out of hidden loudspeakers around the maze. Rafe recognized it as belonging to the farmer, Cornelius Cobb. "Code red; finale section of the maze; code red," Cornelius said. "This is not a drill. All staff and chaperones must now follow emergency procedures. Students, remain calm and in your groups. You will be guided to the nearest exit. I repeat. Code red, finale section. This is not a drill."

At that moment, the wind changed direction, pushing thick smoke towards the children. Lady Jane motioned for Blake and the captain of the Thunder Stars to join her next to Rafe. "Boys, there should be twenty-three students here," she said. "Count heads and move everyone to the tented staging area behind the fairy mound. You'll be safe there."

"We're on it," said Blake. "Let's go."

"No. I'm staying with Lady Jane," said Rafe.

"You can't, my darling, and please don't argue with me," Lady Jane placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "All the adults

have assigned areas that we must supervise in emergency situations. Right now, I need you to help Blake get the other students out of harm's way."

Rafe nodded reluctantly and watched his grandmother disappear into the smoke-filled maze. Every instinct in his body told him to go after her, but he felt strangely rooted to the ground. Looking down, he realized why. Seamus had wedged himself between his legs and was clinging to his ankles.

"Hey! What are you doing down there?" asked Rafe. He put his hands under the leprechaun's arms and pulled him to his feet. "Get up."

"I tink it's obvious," replied Seamus. "Avoidin' da fire so I don't become a crispy creature."

"Come on, Rafe," said Blake. "We need to get the teams behind the fairy mound."

"Dat's a fine plan," said Seamus, running after the boys.

When they reached the mound, Blake counted heads and organized the children into pairs to go to the staging area. The captain of the Thunder Stars did the same for his team.

"Rafe, you're with Baylor," said Blake. "I've got Audra."

"Yer takin' forever. I'll be waitin' fer ya behind da tent." Seamus struck off by himself and disappeared behind the fairy mound.

The group had just begun to move towards the tents when they saw Seamus barreling back towards them as fast as his little limbs could carry him, and screaming higher than any girl Rafe had ever heard.

Scuttling to Baylor's side, the leprechaun disappeared beneath her cape. "Bears, and dey don't appear ta be in a good mood!" Seamus raised a finger from under Baylor's cape and pointed towards the mound.

Two enormous black bears sauntered into view. Upon seeing the children, they reared onto their massive hindquarters and roared.

Oliver dropped to his knees and flung his arms around Leopold's neck. "It's Old S-S-Slewfoot and his mate."

Thunder resounded overhead and Rafe felt the first drops of moisture hit his face. Rafe and Blake stepped in front of the girls, and Blake drew his sword, brandishing it at the bears and calling to the other students to stay back.

Rafe felt for the whip at his side, but it quickly dawned on him that he didn't have the slightest idea how to use it. What he really needed was Blake's sword, but he doubted his friend would be willing to part with it when there was a bear standing in front of them.

"Jump into the fairy ring, Baylor," commanded a familiar voice behind the children. "You'll be safe there."

Although confused, Baylor did as she was told and jumped over the trench and into the circle. Oliver and Seamus followed suit.

Rafe whirled around to see the auburn-haired young man from the beach holding a package wrapped in brown paper. "Luke, what are you doing here?"

Luke didn't answer. Instead, he removed a glowing blue object from the paper and tossed it into the air. The red-tailed hawk caught the item in his sharp talons and hovered in the wind above the fairy mound.

The bears seemed frightened by the shining blue object in the hawk's claws, and, to Rafe's relief, they ran towards the edge of the meadow and out of sight as the wind and rain began in earnest.

As the storm heightened, the wind whipped and howled.

Luke stretched his arms out on either side of his body and pushed against the wind with all his might. "Thomas!" he shouted.

The dark-haired young man, whom Rafe had seen climbing the cliffs earlier in the afternoon, charged out of the darkness and dashed towards Luke. Upon reaching him, the young man bent his knees and pressed his shoulders into Luke's back, bracing his friend against the wind.

Several bolts of lightning jabbed the ground around the fairy mound. Each strike sent out four or five balls of fire that looked like the ones that had struck Baylor earlier in the day.

The lightning balls ricocheted through the crowd of students, causing everyone around Rafe to panic. They screamed, cried, and darted about, trying to avoid being hit. Leopold added to the pandemonium by racing after the fireballs and barking. No one, except Rafe, seemed to notice that inside the fairy circle where Baylor, Oliver, and Seamus sat, it wasn't even raining.

The fireballs spun off in different directions, and some of the flaming spheres headed straight for the mound, but whenever one of the fiery orbs tried to enter the fairy circle, Rafe heard a sizzling sound and it vaporized. It was as if Luke had erected an invisible protective barrier around the circle's circumference.

The lightning balls continued to chase the terrified students, but any time one of the fiery spheres got close to striking a student, an invisible force lifted them off their feet and tossed them into the fairy ring like ragdolls. Soon, everyone on the team was safely inside the circle except Rafe, Blake, and Leopold.

Outside the ring, Rafe dodged fireballs while Blake whacked at them with his sword. A massive lightning ball approached

Blake from behind and he was yanked off his feet and flung into the fairy circle with the other students.

Blake's sword dropped to the ground near Rafe, who stepped on the sword's handle, kicked it into the air with his foot, and caught it in his right hand. He didn't know how to use a whip, but a sword he could handle.

"Stay behind me!" Rafe shouted to Luke. "I've got a sword!"

"No! *You* stay behind *me*!" bellowed Luke. "Thomas, get him out of here!"

Thomas removed his shoulders from Luke's back and pushed Rafe towards the mound. "We do not need your help. Jump into the fairy ring with the others."

"Oost, oost, moseefa nasseum!" Luke shouted to the dog. Leopold immediately launched himself through the air at Rafe and Thomas.

"No, Leopold!" shouted Rafe.

The dog caught Rafe in the chest, and Thomas in the back, with such force that they were both lifted up and over the trench. Rafe landed hard on his back next to Baylor, and the world went black for a few moments. He'd never had the wind so completely knocked out of him before, but he managed to take a few breaths when Baylor helped him into a sitting position.

Baylor turned to the young man lying next to Rafe. "What did he say to my dog?"

Thomas got to his feet and walked to the edge of the fairy circle. "Luke told your dog to push us into the fairy circle. He should not have done that. I should be out there with him."

As Rafe's vision cleared, he wasn't sure he believed what he was seeing. Outside the fairy circle, there were at least a dozen young men and women with swords, slashing at the lightning balls. In addition, there were dozens more young men and

women surrounding the outside of the circle. They faced the savage wind with their arms outstretched, just like Luke had done earlier. Each of them had a companion bracing their backs. They appeared to be successfully pushing back the wind, fire, smoke, and rain with all their might until the attacks by the fiery orbs intensified and the young men and women began to disappear, one by one.

"I must be seeing things," whispered Rafe.

"If you are seeing things, then I am, too," said Baylor.

Rafe struggled to his feet and hobbled over to Thomas, who was watching Luke from inside the circle. Somehow, Luke had acquired a sword and he was magnificent with it. The blade was a flashing blur as Luke fought the flaming orbs whipping about him. Luke's precision and superbly intuitive execution left no doubt in Rafe's mind that he was watching an expert swordsman.

Before Luke had time to finish off the last barrage of fireballs, two more serrated bolts of lightning struck the ground and sent another volley of fiery spheres towards him. Luke swung his sword, deftly deflecting four of the fireballs, but two slammed into his chest and mid-section. Dropping the sword, he clutched his abdomen.

"Hang on!" shouted Thomas. "I'm coming."

Luke collapsed to the dirt. "You will not. You stay in that circle," he said. "I put you there for a reason."

Thomas sank to his knees. "My place is with you."

Luke smiled at him. "Take care of her. I'll see . . . you again . . . in . . . Araboth," he gasped.

"No, no, no, no, no," murmured Thomas, hanging his head as Luke disappeared.

To Rafe's horror, he spotted the four tiny tots from the maze. He shook Thomas' shoulders and pointed towards the children.

“Look! There are children outside the circle. We have to help them.”

“Janey Mack! Der not children! Der fairies and dey can take care of demselves!” bawled Seamus.

Rafe looked back at the children in astonishment as they scurried towards the circle. He could see the faint image of wings on each child's back. The wings were so sheer and translucent that they could barely be seen except as shimmering colors of light. More tiny drops of light glistened from the fairies' hair and framed their sweet, gentle features. They were the most enchanting creatures Rafe had ever seen.

In a matter of moments, there were no longer just a few tots approaching the fairy ring. There were hundreds of them. They floated over the trench and into the ring, mesmerized by the blue light Simon grasped in his talons high above the mound.

The object radiated hot blue rays and immersed the fairy circle in its pale glow. Keeping their eyes fixed on the hawk, the fairies joined their tiny hands and began to spin in one direction around the fairy circle.

The strange blue light intensified and Rafe felt its warmth on his face. With a further pulse of heat, it fell from the bird's talons. But instead of dropping to the ground, it hung in the air, suspended above the fairy circle.

All at once, Rafe heard a tremendous noise and the object above the mound transformed itself into a magnificent shining blue star.

Seamus angrily shook the silver bough at the star. “No! Don't take me! Tis me one night 'ere.”

Faster and faster the fairies spun around the ring as the star danced above them. To Rafe's amazement, the fairy children began decreasing in size until they became tiny dots of light. Then

the inside of the circle started to hum and spin in the opposite direction. As the humming increased in volume, it transformed into the most peculiar music Rafe had ever heard.

Suddenly, there was an earsplitting crack, and the blue glow of light above the fairy circle began to spin, too. The last thing Rafe remembered before the whirling blue vortex enfolded everything was Oliver covering his face with his hands and saying repeatedly, "This is not happening. This is not happening. This is not happening."



Chapter Eleven

Mystfira

The blue and yellow lights spun uncontrollably around Rafe, or maybe he was the one spinning. He didn't know for sure. The strange music persisted, occasionally punctuated by the shrieks of the other terrified students.

Without warning, Rafe sensed his body being lifted from the ground. It felt like he was being sucked through a large straw at high speed. Periodically, he caught glimpses of the other children's horrified faces as he was twisted every which way through a funnel of blue and yellow. Then, suddenly, the hot blue light vanished, the music ceased, and all was silent and mercifully still.

Rafe's head reeled and the world continued to spin, but he rolled to his side and sucked in a few deep breaths anyway. When he was able to focus, he saw Blake lying next to him, Leopold draped over his chest.

"That hurts, Leopold. Please, get off me," croaked Blake.

Rafe sat up and looked around. "What just happened?"

Blake licked his lips and rubbed his forehead. "I have no idea, but I'm going to need an aspirin."

Thomas and Seamus stood nearby. Neither of them seemed the least bit disturbed by what had just happened. In fact, they appeared to be deep in conversation. Occasionally, Seamus swatted at some of the tiny lights leaving the periphery of circle and floating around his head.

Turning his head, Rafe saw Deidre, Tahj, Parker, and Rand

had landed in a tangled heap next to him. Two more children Rafe didn't recognize, a boy dressed like a ninja, and an Asian girl dressed like a witch, had landed in the pile as well. All of them were sprawled on the ground, looking pale and dazed.

"Is everyone okay?" asked Blake.

"I think so," replied Rafe.

Blake moaned. "Do you see Baylor? Why is everything so blurry?"

"Not yet. My vision is fuzzy, too, but it's getting better," said Rafe. "I think there are two people from the other team here. Look to your left."

Still lying prone, Blake turned his head to the left. "Yep," he said. "That's Neal Trask and Mikiko Kaouri from the Thunder Stars."

The small vibrating lights, which had surrounded the fairy mound earlier, began to leave the outside of the circle and drift towards the children.

Rafe spied Baylor on the other side of the circle. She knelt, one hand touching the ground and the other lifted to eye level. Two sparkling lights danced just above her palm, and she regarded them with a mixture of astonishment and curiosity. Every now and then, the lights timidly touched her fingertips.

"I see your sister." Rafe grabbed Blake's hands and pulled him into a sitting position.

"I better check on her," said Blake. He rose and stumbled towards his twin.

"What's going on around here? Why is it so bright, and where did the fairy mound go?" asked Deidre in a shrill voice.

Rafe's eyes widened in amazement as it dawned on him that he and the other children were no longer in a meadow. The fairy ring was now located in the middle of a strange beach. Instead of

sitting next to a grassy mound, they were basking in the shadow of a large tower-shaped mountain covered with lush flowers and verdant vegetation. As the mountain spiraled heavenward, its peak disappeared into a pink swirling mist.

Dropping to his knees, Rafe examined the sand beneath him. It was a brilliant shade of red. He grabbed a handful and let it sift through his fingers. To his astonishment, it felt like powdered silk.

Rafe's confusion grew. If this was a beach, why couldn't he hear a single wave lapping against it? Lifting his eyes to the edge of the shore, he saw what looked like water, but it was dark, thick, and still.

Baylor's hawk, Simon, shrieked somewhere above the children. Rafe tilted his head skyward and caught his breath. It had been night in the maze, but wherever they were now, dusk was just beginning to fall and twelve exquisitely colored moons appeared in the sky.

Rafe swallowed hard as the shock settled over him. This was not Earth!

Oliver hadn't reached that conclusion yet because he was too busy regarding the sky with the eye of an artist. "This is the most amazing sunset I've ever seen. The sky . . . the moons . . . the colors are exquisite. Pale blue, rosy pink, silver, green . . . red, purple, gold, turquoise, orange . . . royal blue, yellow, and that moon striated with every color," murmured Oliver. "Every passing moment makes the shades richer and more intense. I have to paint this!"

At that moment, the tiny vibrating lights hovering about the children began to rapidly drift out of the fairy circle and disappear. "I can see what yer doin'. Every fairy fer derself," shouted Seamus. He shook his fist at the remaining lights. "Ya cowards!"

Deidre angrily strode past Rafe to confront Thomas and Seamus. "I demand to know where we are."

"Ya have such bad manners," said the leprechaun. "I was talkin' ta 'em first."

Deidre's lips curled into a sneer. "Oh, that's very funny. Under the circumstances, I am being *extremely* polite."

Thomas tugged Seamus away from Deidre and tucked the leprechaun behind his back. "I am Thomas."

"I don't care what your name is!" snapped Deidre. "Where are we?"

Thomas sighed and said, "We're on the island of Palades in a world known as Mystfira."

"What does that mean?" said Deidre, her hands on her hips.

"I know this is confusing for you," replied Thomas gently. "Mystfira is a world used as a training facility for—"

Thomas broke off in mid-sentence as Seamus poked him in the back with his shillelagh. Twelve hooded figures approached the children, each cloaked with the color of one of the twelve moons. They carried long ivory scepters tipped with radiant crystals matching the color of their cloaks.

"Ya better save yer answers fer da Sakal."

"Everyone stay behind me and do not speak," said Thomas.

Thomas and Seamus lowered themselves to one knee and reverently bowed their heads as the hooded figures arrived. "Madrikim," they murmured.

The man in the striated cloak stepped forward and lowered his mantle, revealing shoulder-length black hair. "Rise. I hope you have an explanation for this breach of security, jarvartan. The novices are due here momentarily."

Seamus rose and slunk into the background next to Rafe and Baylor, but Thomas remained on his knees for several more

seconds before rising. "I do have an explanation," he replied respectfully. "One of the children's guardians was in possession of the Blue Star."

"The star has been played by the champion, then?" asked the figure in the silver cloak.

Thomas nodded. "Yes."

The other cloaked figures lowered their hoods. There were six men and six women with cordial expressions. The woman in the silver cloak had a thick brown braid that spilled to her waist.

The man in the striated cloak stared at the bedraggled group. "That still does not explain why there are thirteen children, a leprechaun, and a jarvartan standing on this beach."

"I'd like an explanation myself," said Deidre. "Who are you people? Some kind of magicians?"

Seamus glared at Deidre and tapped his shillelagh on the ground three times. "Were ya not told ta hold yer tongue?" A zipper appeared in place of Deidre's mouth and Seamus quickly zipped it shut. "Ya've been askin' fer dat since I met ya."

"Enough," said the dark haired man. "Blue Star. Now."

Simon's familiar screech filled the air and the hawk appeared, carrying the blue object in his talons. Without prompting, the hawk dropped it into the man's outstretched hand and soared away.

"Speak the three desires of the champion that won possession of you," said the man.

The star began to glow a brilliant blue. Slowly, it rose from the man's hand and hovered above the beach. To Rafe's amazement, it began to speak in a deep throaty voice.

"The guardian's first desire was spoken to me in secret and may only be revealed at the proper time in the future," said the Blue Star in a solemn tone.

The man in the multi-colored cloak said, "I am not amused."

The star shook and almost sounded like it was chuckling. "The guardian's second desire was for me to transport the child who occupied the fairy ring to Mystfira until new protectors could be trained."

"The guardian wished for a child to be taken to one of the most dangerous places in the universe? Surely you must have misheard the request."

"No, I did not," said the star. "The child was to be taken to Mystfira until the new guardians completed their training."

"Please explain why there is more than one child here then. The guardian who held the Blue Star was in charge of one child, not thirteen."

"In case you haven't noticed, the children didn't come with their names tattooed on their foreheads. I had to transport all the children inside the circle to make sure I got the right one," replied the Blue Star.

The man in the striped coat turned to Thomas. "Why was there more than one child in that fairy ring? Have all the guardians been lost?"

Thomas swallowed uncomfortably. "Yes. The guardians were outnumbered, and they knew they were fighting a losing battle. The children were thrown into the fairy ring when the guardians heard the Blue Star invoked. That is why all of the children are alive and standing here with us."

"Are you sure all the other guardians have been lost?" asked the man again.

"Yes . . . they are gone," whispered Thomas.

"Typhicus, the guardians did exactly what they were trained to do," said the woman dressed in the silver cloak.

"Of course they did," replied the man in charge. "Your

training is always superb, Madri Isabo, but their actions have left us in a predicament."

"I'm not done," said the star impatiently. "Lastly, I was instructed to duplicate and protect the property and dwelling found at 444 Sea Crest Drive, Clifton Cove, Maine, by transferring it to the Palace of Pearls. It is the residence of Baylor Orion Wingate, the child who was to be saved."

Baylor sucked in her breath and looked at her brother.

"It's okay," he said, putting a protective arm around his sister. "The good news is that we're all still alive."

"Seriously?" Baylor whispered. "What would the bad news be then?"

Blake took note of the scathing looks being thrown at his twin by the other students. "Sadly, the bad news would be that your popularity with our classmates has not improved."

Baylor groaned and dropped her head into her hands.

"Shhhhhh," hissed the leprechaun.

The man in the striated cloak extended his arm once again and opened his palm. "Thank you for enlightening us. That will be all for now." The Blue Star made a crackling sound and fizzled out as it dropped from the sky and into his hand.

"Typhicus, we'll have to sort this out later. The sun is setting. It's time for the Summoning Ceremony to begin," said the woman in the silver cloak. "You must open the Mount of Mists."

The man in the striated cloak examined the sky and nodded. Pointing his scepter at the mountain behind the children, he said, "Reveal the Theoculus."

The crystal at the tip of Typhicus' scepter began to glow and Rafe felt the ground beneath him begin to pitch violently. Catching his balance, he swung around to look at the mountain.

The vegetation on a large section of the mountain's base melted away to bare rock right before his eyes.

The shaking persisted until a gigantic cracking and ripping sound was heard, followed by a tremendous roar. To Rafe's astonishment, the base of the mountain slid open, and from its depths coasted a lofty circular structure ringed by gleaming blue marble columns and twelve gates. Step by step, a staircase unfolded from the building and came to rest just in front of the stunned children.

Typhicus lowered his scepter. "Jarvartan, please take the children to the top of the Theoculus and seat them in the twelfth balcony."

"Yes, Madri." Thomas bowed at the waist as the twelve cloaked figures walked around him and began to ascend the steps in a slow dignified manner.

"Wh-wh-what's the Theoculus?" asked Oliver.

"It serves many purposes, but tonight it is a place of welcome and reception. It is completely safe. Do not worry. Just follow me," said Thomas as he began to climb the stairs.

"Wait," said Blake. "If Deidre promises to keep her mouth shut, will someone please unzip her lips? She'll be polite from now on."

Seamus leaned on his shillelagh and smiled. "I might consider it if she promises not ta talk fer da rest of da night."

Deidre crossed her heart with her finger and tried to look penitent. The leprechaun tapped his shillelagh on the ground and the zipper disappeared.

Deidre patted her face and felt her lips. Once she established her mouth was normal again, she threw back her shoulders and sashayed past Seamus as if nothing had happened. As Deidre passed Baylor, she mouthed, "This is all your fault."

Rafe ignored the drama between the two girls and began to climb the gently sloping stairs to the majestic edifice called the Theoculus. Its circular wall, composed of exquisite shades of gold, seemed to be slowly revolving, and he was mesmerized by the elaborate geometric shapes etched into the fern-like texture of the circular walls, gates, and columns.

When Rafe reached the top of the steps, he saw that the Theoculus was, indeed, turning. The building sat on an elaborate rotating platform.

"Wow! Best merry-go-round ever," said Oliver as he reached the top step and stood beside Rafe.

Except for the twelve grotesque stone statues standing at each gate, Rafe found the Theoculus truly enchanting. He felt the hair rising on the back of his neck as a massive statue revolved towards him. The statue's gruesome face rattled his nerves. It had a high forehead, long pointed ears, the nose of a gorilla, and a long snout. The snout was closed, but two yellow fangs peeked out of either side of its bottom jaw. The body of the statue seemed equally horrific. Two humongous bat-shaped wings, at least twenty feet wide, unfurled from the monster's gristly back, and every muscle in the statue's body looked taut and poised to pounce.

Rafe turned to Seamus. "What are those things?"

"Dey er gargoyles, eejit child."

Rafe gripped the top of Seamus' shillelagh and waited until he had the leprechaun's full attention. "Knock it off," he said. "There's been enough name-calling for one night."

The leprechaun grumbled and wrenched his shillelagh away from Rafe.

Thomas watched the last bit of sun sink below the horizon. "Madri Typhicus, I am afraid there is no time left for the children to climb to the top of the Theoculus. They are going to need a lift."

Typhicus nodded. "Madrikim, I need each of you to take at least one of these youngsters with you when you go to your gates."

Deidre started to protest, but stopped when Blake elbowed her in the side and pointed to the leprechaun. She pressed her lips together and, when it was her turn, reluctantly stepped onto the platform with one of the cloaked individuals.

Oliver bit his lip and Rafe swallowed hard as the woman in the silver cloak approached them. "I am Madri Isabo. Please, come with me. We have the last gate and it will be here momentarily."

Rafe stepped onto the rotating platform with Oliver, and Madri Isabo positioned them beneath the hulking statue at her gate. "This gargoyle will take you to the top of the building to join Thomas and Seamus."

Oliver's hands flew to his head, and his facial muscles twitched. "But-but-but, he's a s-s-statue."

Isabo smiled. "No, gargoyles only look like stone when they are standing still," she said. "Gentlemen, meet Keswick, the leader of our gargoyles."

Rafe felt a leathery arm slip around his waist and heard a whomp, whomp, whomp sound as the gargoyle's huge gristly wings began to beat. Keswick tucked Oliver underneath his other arm and hurtled towards the top of the building, Oliver shrieking hysterically. The other gargoyles followed their leader, carrying their own wriggling and screaming children.

It took only a few moments for Keswick and the other gargoyles to reach the roof of the Theoculus. They deposited the astounded children and agitated dog at the feet of Thomas and Seamus. Jumping over the side of the building, they swiftly returned to their positions at the entrance gates.

Rafe scrambled to his feet and scanned his new location. A waist-high wall surrounded the outer perimeter of the roof. The children were on the flat portion of the golden roof, which sloped up into a dome with a large opening at the top.

When Oliver began to snivel, Rafe turned his attention to his fellow Ryder-Knight students. Most of the girls were crying and trembling . . . except for Baylor, who sat frozen and unblinking next to Leopold. Blake's face was a rigid mask of anger, and his hands were balled up in tight fists at his sides.

Thomas crouched next to Seamus. "Leprechaun, can you do something to calm these children?"

"I can," replied Seamus. "But ya'll owe me a favor. I need ta get up der on dat wall."

Thomas lifted the leprechaun onto the wall and steadied him, while Seamus reached into one of the leather pouches at his waist and drew out a handful of glittering powder. The leprechaun took a deep breath and blew it into the air above the children.

The tiny gleaming particles showered down on them. At first, Rafe thought he was going to sneeze, but the feeling passed and was replaced by a remarkable sense of peace and well-being. For the first time in nearly a week, Rafe felt completely happy and calm.

Seamus pointed towards the heavens. "Look at the sky. 'Tisn't it da most beautiful ting ya've ever seen?"

Rafe found his eyes eagerly following Seamus' finger. He'd never seen a night sky so sparkly. The twelve full moons shimmered brilliantly, and the twinkling stars were so lovely. They reminded him of the beautiful lights his parents strung every year during the winter holidays.

Oliver looked over the edge of the Theoculus. "What a

beautiful view. You know what's funny? I used to be afraid of heights, but I'm not anymore."

"How fortunate," said Thomas. "When did you conquer your fear?"

Oliver puffed out his chest proudly. "A few minutes ago."

"Leprechaun, what did you do?" said Thomas with a frown.

"Don't get yer knickers in a knot. 'Twas only xant dust. In small doses, 'tis merely a tranquilizer."

Rafe yawned. "What is xant dust?"

"Xant dust is one of the protective ingredients found in a grain of fairy dust," replied Thomas.

"And fairy dust is what?" asked Rafe.

"Fairy dust is one of the items fairies and leprechauns employ to perform magic." Thomas glared at Seamus. "Xant dust is not to be used on humans. You know very well the Xantman was removed from Earth thousands of years ago for misusing xant dust."

"Did ya not just ask me fer a favor?" asked Seamus, boring his eyes straight back at Thomas.

"Who is the Xantman?" asked Rafe interrupting the staring contest.

"On your Earth, he was known as the Sandman," replied Thomas.

"Oh . . . I've heard of him," said Rafe. "He's the guy who gives boys and girls sweet dreams by sprinkling magic dust in their eyes at night. He's not real, you know."

"He is real, and he was removed from your Earth when he started doling out nightmares to wicked children."

Seamus shrugged his shoulders. "An overreaction if ya ask me."

"Leprechaun . . ." said Thomas in a warning tone.

“What? Janey Mack, yer makin’ me irritable. Da children ern’t sleepin’ and der not damaged so why don’t ya just belt yer gob.”

Thomas sighed. “I’m not going to argue with you. At least the one called Deidre will be calm and well-behaved for the next several hours.”

Seamus sniggered. “’Twill be longer den dat. Ya’ll tank me later.”

All at once the Theoculus stopped revolving, the sky dimmed and blinked out.

“It’s pitch black. I can’t see,” said Oliver calmly.

“It has begun,” replied Thomas. “Look over the wall.”

The darkness beneath the Theoculus was suddenly and spectacularly illuminated. Rafe hung his head over the wall and rubbed his eyes in disbelief. Each member of the Sakal had shed their cloaks, revealing a pair of blazing white wings. The tips of their wings were the same color as their gowns and robes, which were luminescing as brilliantly as their wings.

“Wow,” said Blake while Rafe gaped. “Why are your friends glowing like that?”

“Their bodies, wings, and clothing shine as beacons to guide the new angels to the Theoculus,” said Thomas.

“So this is a training place for *angels*?” Rafe raised an eyebrow.

Seamus plugged his ears with his index fingers. “Ya, and fer da stinkin’ fairies, too. Get ready fer da clappers.”

An explosion ripped from the heavens like a sonic boom. The noise took Rafe by surprise, but he didn’t jump or react in any way. None of the children did.

A large burst of colors appeared, whizzing and spinning in erratic patterns. For the next several minutes, as soon as one light

display twinkled and fluttered down to the sea, another would appear.

"I love fireworks," Oliver said dreamily. He propped his elbows on the wall and cupped his chin in the palms of his hands, gazing at the spectacle.

Rafe found it peculiar that the colorful lights didn't seem to be extinguished when they touched the water. Instead, they bounced playfully along the top of the sea and separated into eleven sparkling rows of different colors. Then the ropes of colors twisted their way to the beach and began to approach the Theoculus.

As the lustrous lines of colors began to ascend the steps of the building, Rafe saw that they were being caused by winged-children with the same glowing gowns and robes as the Sakal. Leaning over the wall, Rafe pointed to the children. "Who are they?"

"They are the new angels and fairies. They have just been summoned from the seventh heaven of Araboth," replied Thomas.

"You *were* telling the truth." Rafe ran his hands through his hair in bewilderment. "This really is an angelic training ground."

"Yes. Mystfira is a training facility for angels and fairies located between the sixth heaven of Zebul and the seventh heaven of Araboth."

Rafe was sure that he should be feeling some distress about not being on Earth any longer, but he couldn't muster any concern. None of the other children exhibited any noticeable anxiety, either. They merely watched the unfolding events with great curiosity.

A huge lop-sided grin spread over Oliver's face. "The angels down there seem to be about our age."

"Time flows a little differently in the heavens than on your Earth," said Thomas, "but according to your understanding of time, the angels that you see here tonight are approximately twelve-and-a-half years old, so I guess that would make them about your age."

Seamus pointed to the smallest children dressed in glowing yellow robes. "But da fairies 'ave ta start der trainin' earlier. Der only about tree er four-years-old. I detest 'em less at dis age."

"Why do they have different colored wings?" asked Rafe.

"In addition to the fairies, Mystfira trains ten different types of angels. Each group has a distinct wing color. As the angels mature, the outside of their wings becomes white, except for the tip of each feather, which retains its original color. Their inner wings become a dark greyish or brown."

Oliver draped himself over the wall to get a better look at the angels. "Isabo has silver wings. What kind of angel is she?"

"Isabo is a guardian," replied Thomas.

Baylor squeezed into a space under Rafe's arm and said, "Look at those angels with the pink and red wings. What kind of angels are they?"

"The pink wings are the cherubim and the red are the seraphim."

"What are the cherubim and seraphim trained to do?" asked Baylor.

Seamus snorted derisively. "Do? Dey don't *do* anythin'."

Thomas laughed. "The cherubim and seraphim are the musicians, dancers, and artists of the angelic world."

"Dey tink der so superior," mumbled Seamus.

Baylor turned to look at Thomas. "What kind of angel are you?"

"I am not an angel. I am a jarvartan."

“What is a jarvartan?” she asked.

“The jarvartan are a race of beings that are responsible for assisting the angels with their assignments on Earth,” said Thomas. “We live here in Mystfira.”

“Look,” said Rafe, “the angels are going inside.”

“Everyone follow me,” said Seamus, setting off towards a stairwell on the roof. “We’re goin’ inside, too.”



Chapter Twelve

The Summoning Ceremony

Overflowing with ornate columns, elaborate carvings, and magnificent statues, the inside of the Theoculus dazzled Rafe's mind. Ten imposing ivory columns stretched out of the blue marble floor and held the twelve-tiered balcony in place. The Pantheon in Rome was the grandest building Rafe had ever seen in his travels, but it did not begin to compare to the splendor of the Theoculus.

Dropping into a plump seat next to Baylor, Rafe surveyed the room from his twelfth floor vantage point. The balconies faced a curved wall filled with golden statues of winged figures bearing shields. The remarkable statues were stacked all the way to the dome of the Theoculus. A long midnight blue curtain hung on either side of the balcony, obscuring the golden-winged statues closest to the children.

Thomas slipped into a row of seats behind the children and said, "In a few minutes, when the Sakal take their seats below the Wall of Honor, they will welcome the new angels."

"Who exactly are the Sakal again?" asked Rafe. "I mean . . . I know they're angels, but what's their purpose here?"

"The Sakal is a council of eleven angels and one fairy. They oversee the training and instruction of the angels and fairies in Mystfira."

Baylor furrowed her brow. "Why did you call them 'madrikim' when we were on the beach?"

“Madrikim is plural for the word ‘madri’ which means ‘instructor’ or ‘teacher’ in the angelic language,” said Thomas. “It is a title used when addressing any teacher and, most especially, a member of the Sakal.”

“Will ya stop yer yappin’?” said Seamus. “’Tis about ta begin.”

Rafe shifted his gaze to the floor beneath him. The Sakal had entered the building and seated themselves in twelve golden chairs under the wall of statues. Strangely, their gowns and robes were no longer glowing, but what was more striking—with one exception—was that the Sakal no longer had their wings.

Rafe leaned forward in his seat. “Hey, I can see everyone’s faces down there like I was standing directly in front of them.”

Thomas gave the leprechaun a quizzical look, and Seamus responded with a wink. “’Tis da xant dust. Does wonders fer da eyesight.”

Rafe was still trying to work out his new binocular vision when he heard startled murmurs begin to emanate from the balconies beneath him, followed by groans and cries of distress.

Hearing the noise from the balconies, Typhicus stood and walked to a golden podium. “It is time for the summoning ceremony to begin. I am Madri Typhicus, and I am the administrator of Mystfira. On behalf of the Sakal, I welcome you to the largest and most elite angelic training facility in the universe. By the sound of things, you have noticed that your bodies and your minds have undergone a sudden transformation.

“Your bodies now come in all shapes, sizes, and colors, and they will retain only the essential angelic abilities mandatory for you to survive in Mystfira.

“Do not be distressed,” continued Typhicus. “You will resume your angelic forms from time to time in order to complete your training in Mystfira; however, the transformation that

you have experienced is also a necessary requirement for your training.”

“Why?” cried several voices from the balcony.

“In the past, many of our angelic trainees were less than sympathetic to the human condition. We have found that this is the only way for you, as angels, to truly understand the creatures that you serve, safeguard, and inspire on Earth. You cannot fathom the difficulties that they face any other way. From now on, you will experience life from the human perspective. You will act as they do. You will eat as they do. You will drink as they do. You will sleep as they do,” said Typhicus, as more murmurs of discontent drifted from the balconies. “You will experience sickness and pain as they do. You will experience time as they do. You will think as they do, and, most importantly, you will *feel* as they do.”

More groans and angry wails filled the air.

Typhicus silenced the angelic students with a wave of his hands. “As you can see, the angels of the Sakal no longer have their wings, either. This is because those of us in authority will also experience the human condition during your training. Please realize this is not pleasant for any of us, but it is an essential part of your angelic training.”

“Why haven’t the fairies lost their wings?” shouted someone from the crowd. “That’s not fair!”

“Fairies are not angels, and they are not charged with the care of human beings,” said Typhicus. “It is now time for the madrikim to introduce themselves and extend their official invitation to train at one of the many palace fortresses here in Mystfira. Please try to remember the names of your instructors.”

Typhicus nodded to Madri Isabo, and she rose from her chair, smoothing her silver gown as she walked to the podium. Her dark chestnut braid had been pulled to the side, and it looked

as thick around as Rafe's arm. "Guardians, we are the protectors of humanity. I am Madri Isabo. You will please join me at the Palace of Pearls," she said proudly.

Next, a tiny woman with short, curly black hair stood up. Lifting the skirt of her long, yellow gown, she flitted across the floor to the lectern. She was the only member of the Sakal who had retained her wings, and they fluttered in an exquisite manner. Her delicate upturned nose accentuated her doll-like face, and her eyes were the most unnatural shade of green Rafe had ever seen. "Fairies, we are the protectors of all elements and nature on Earth. I am Madri Fey. You will please join me in the Fairy Forest at The Tree of Tuatha."

"Why don't we get a palace?" whined one of the new fairies.

Madri Fey's eyes twinkled. "Have no fear, my little fairies. You will love the forest more than any palace."

Laughing, a muscular man in an elegant, crimson-red robe traded places with Madri Fey. His slightly wavy, almost raven black hair plunged stylishly over his collared robe, and a lock of hair dipped devilishly over his piercing blue eyes. "Seraphim, we are the joyous musicians, singers, dancers, and artists of the angelic world. I am Madri Roanin. You will please join me at the Red Beryl Palace."

A woman with burnished brown hair in a pale blue gown took the podium next. Her face did not look as attractive as the other angels', but it wore one of the kindest expressions Rafe had ever seen. "Virtues, we are the overseers of good and givers of strength. I am Madri Estel. You will please join me at the Winter Blue Palace."

As Madri Estel seated herself, a commanding figure with hair the color of his golden robe took center stage. "I am the Archangel Michael. Archangels, we are the messengers, protectors, and

miracle workers of the angel world. You will please join me at the Golden Palace.”

A tittering rose from the angels beneath them, and Rafe saw Seamus and Thomas exchanging concerned glances.

“What’s Michael doin’ ‘ere? Where’s Madri Zadeka?” asked Seamus.

“I do not know,” whispered Thomas.

Madri Typhicus quieted the crowd with a stern look, and a studious-looking woman in a turquoise gown stepped forward. Her long flaxen hair was swept up and away from her beautiful face. “Dominions, we are the recorders of history and overseers of goodness. I am Madri Keva. You will please join me at the Palace of Turquoise.”

When the next angel stepped forward wearing a rose pink gown, soft gasps filled the room. Rafe gaped in awe. Parker’s beauty paled in comparison to the angel in front of him. Soft blonde ringlets fell about her enchanting face. Her eyes, fascinatingly dark, sparkled and her cheeks flushed soft pink as she gazed into the crowd. “Cherubim, we are also joyous musicians, singers, dancers, and artists of the angelic world. I am Madri Avalon. You will please join me at the Rose Quartz Palace.”

A tall, handsome, dark-skinned man in an orange robe exchanged places at the podium with Madri Avalon. He exuded calmness, and serenity seemed to seep from his pores. “Carrions, we are the carriers of the dark entities to the underworld. I am Madri Omega. You will please join me at Palace of Umber Cascades.”

Rafe elbowed Baylor. “How are you doing on remembering these names?”

“Just ducky,” she replied, rolling her eyes. “I don’t know why angels can’t have regular names like Bob or Sarah. And

why do there have to be so many of them? Look, there's the next one."

The most distinguished-looking man of the group now stood at the podium. His hair, thick and generously flecked with silver, made him look wise and his purple robe, regal. "Powers, we are the magical healers of the angel world. I am Madri Ezekiel. You will please join me at the Amethyst Palace."

As Madri Ezekiel returned to his seat, a tall burly man, wearing a royal blue robe, strode across the floor, curly black hair flapping wildly. Rafe got the distinct feeling that the man wanted the ceremony over and done with as quickly as possible. "Principalities, we are the male warriors, the protectors of Araboth. I am Madri Uriah. You will please join me at the Sapphire Sky Palace."

The last person to rise was a woman with long flaming red hair. She had a fierce demeanor and she did not look the least bit comfortable in her flowing green gown. "Thrones, we are the female warriors, the protectors of Araboth. I am Madri Saniel. You will please join me at the Emerald Sky Palace."

"Ladies and gentlemen, your instructors," said Typhicus, turning to applaud the angels behind him.

The new angels followed the madri's lead and clapped enthusiastically.

When the applause died away, Typhicus spoke again. "I have one last thing to share with you before you leave the Theoculus tonight. Due to unforeseen circumstances, there are thirteen human children in Mystfira with no guardians. These children must be protected until their new guardians are trained."

"What? Humans here in Mystfira?" shouted someone from the balconies.

"Yes, and I'm afraid it has presented us with more than a few problems. Madri Zadeka relinquished her position to

the archangel Michael just moments before the Summoning Ceremony began tonight. In addition to training the new archangels, Madri Michael is in charge of our efforts to keep the children safe. We are deeply grateful that he is with us."

Soft gasps and more muttering filled the Theoculus. Typhicus raised his arms and motioned for the students to quiet down once again. "Most of you know that our palaces have the ability to move and interlock with one another during times of war or trouble. Michael has informed me that the archangel's Golden Palace, the guardian's Palace of Pearls, the seraphim's Palace of Red Beryl, and the cherubim's Palace of Rose Quartz have just been locked together in the third ring of Truvian."

The members of the Sakal looked stunned by Typhicus' announcement.

Rafe turned around to Thomas and whispered, "Why do they look so shocked?"

"The palaces have not linked in a thousand years. The heavens were at war with the underworld the last time this happened," replied Thomas. "I'm sure it is a little distressing to the Sakal to have to take this step."

Seamus frowned. "Is da netherworld after da children?"

"To my knowledge, the dark spirits only wish to harm the one known as Baylor," whispered Thomas.

Rafe was certain that he should feel disturbed that some nefarious force from the underworld wanted to hurt Baylor, but he simply couldn't muster the ability to care at the moment.

Typhicus cleared his throat loudly to get the angels' attention once again. "Angels, please report to your palaces immediately, and fairies, please go to your forest. You will be dismissed by the levels in which you are seated, beginning with the twelfth balcony. Goodnight and go well."

Thomas rose from his seat. "We will be leaving first. Follow me back to the rooftop."

The children obeyed and when they reached the roof, they found the madrikim waiting for them on the circular walls.

Madri Isabo beckoned the children to stand beneath her. "The palaces have been prepared and await our arrival," she said. She smiled at the children as the tip of her ivory scepter began to glow silver. "Tonight our mode of transportation will be—"

"Gargoyles?" asked Oliver.

"Moonlight," replied the madri.

"Who wants to volunteer to go first?" asked Thomas. "It isn't dangerous."

Rafe shrugged and stepped forward. "I will."

Thomas helped Rafe up onto the wall next to Madri Isabo. She raised her scepter towards the silver moon, and the crystal on top of her scepter glowed even more brilliantly. She smiled at Rafe as she lowered it and touched the tip to the darkness just outside the wall. A large silver square appeared in front of her.

"Step off the ledge and onto the light in front of you," she said. "Stand normally with your hands at your sides."

"Best not to think about it too much," advised Thomas.

Rafe stepped onto the large tile of silver light. It immediately arced and moved forward. He instantly had a feeling of enormous lightness and the sense that he was moving rapidly, yet floating at the same time. It felt a little strange, but not altogether unpleasant. He relaxed as he soared off the island and over the water. As he watched, an extraordinary landscape took shape beneath him. Twelve glowing concentric circles appeared, reminiscent of the rings Baylor built around her fairy houses. Looped through the last ring was another set of twelve concentric circles blazing with fire.

Rafe nearly lost his balance when the tile dipped towards a colossal palace glistening with hues of red, silver, rose, and gold and surrounded by enormous walls. Tucked inside the walls and bathed in the soft glow of the twelve moons, there appeared beautiful gardens, intricate fountains, and huge sculptures.

Suddenly, Rafe saw three familiar stained-glass domes within the confines of the palace. It was Cliff House! The silver tile curved steeply towards the ground and gently deposited Rafe on the crescent-shaped porch.

Baylor arrived next, balanced precariously on her tile of moonlight so that Leopold could ride with her. As soon as the tile touched down, Leopold leapt off, tucked his tail between his legs, and stood next to the front door, refusing to look at Baylor or Rafe.

The rest of the children appeared so rapidly and close together that all Rafe and Baylor could see was a long silver ribbon of light winding through the night sky. One by one, the children landed on the front porch of Cliff House, thrilled and excited by their moonlight ride.

The students were talking to each other with such animation, they did not notice Thomas and Seamus's arrival, nor did they pay any heed to the hawk flying lazy circles in the sky above them.

All of a sudden, the front door to Cliff House swung open, and Leopold bolted through it, knocking the fairy madri who opened the door to the floor.

"Oh, my," said Madri Fey, pulling herself up by the door handle. "Hello, my dears. Come in . . . come in! Don't just stand there."

Two little fairies peeked from behind the madri's yellow gown. Their coffee-colored hair strewn with tiny drops of light

bespoke their celestial origin. Looking at them, Rafe could not fathom what Seamus found so offensive about the little creatures.

“What er dey doin' 'ere?” asked Seamus.

“Oh, that’s Poppe and Potts. Don’t even ask,” said Madri Fey with a wave of her hand. “This is the third time they’ve had to repeat their first training session. Now then, children, Madri Typhicus wanted me to make sure that you were comfortably settled into this lovely house tonight. Come with me.”

The students followed Madri Fey up the spiral staircase to the second floor’s long, wide hallway. Moonlight flowed through two huge arched windows on either end of the hall.

“Lights, please,” said the fairy madri. The chandeliers dotting the ceilings in the hallway instantly illuminated at her command. “I understand that two of you already have bedrooms here.”

“Yes. Baylor and I have bedrooms at this end of the hall,” said Blake.

“Fabulous,” said Madri Fey. “Please go stand by the doors to your bedrooms.” Baylor went to the very end of the hallway and stood at the last doorway on the right. Blake followed and stood by the neighboring door. “Now, everyone else, please choose a door and go stand next to it.”

Blake thumped on the wall next to his bedroom. “Over here Rafe. Take the room next to me.”

The students quickly scattered and began to choose their doors. Oliver chose the door across the hall from Baylor, and Audra chose the door beside his. In no time at all, the children had selected doors and were standing in front of them.

“Excellent,” said Madri Fey. “Now, place your hand on the door you have chosen and concentrate on your bedroom at home.”

While the children placed their hands on a door, Seamus situated himself behind Madri Faye, slyly placing his hand on a door, too.

"Leprechaun, I must insist that you take your hand off that door immediately," said Madri Faye, without turning to look at him.

Seamus made a face behind her back. "I was just restin' against da door. No need ta git yerself in a snit."

Madri Fey closed her eyes, and the yellow crystal at the end of her slender ivory scepter began to shine. Deep in concentration, she touched the stone at the end of her scepter and absorbed the yellow glow into her index finger as she chanted.

*"So that they may rest and retire
Give these children the room they desire."*

That said, Madri Fey twirled her wrist and snapped her thumb and index finger together in the air. Light shot out of the tip of her finger and ricocheted around the hallway, passing through every closed door and out again. The Ryder-Knight students covered their heads with their arms until the light stopped bouncing around and went back to land on the end of the scepter.

Madri Fey giggled. "You now have the rooms for which you wished. Poppe and Potts will bring you something to eat before we return to the fairy forest."

"Thank you, Madri Fey," said Thomas. "Children, I will meet you in the butterfly conservatory tomorrow morning at eight. Make sure you are dressed in your school uniforms, and bring a list of the classes in which you are currently enrolled."

"Time for you to go, leprechaun," said Madri Fey.

"I'd like ta stay fer da snack," said Seamus.

"Have one when you get home."

Seamus thumped his shillelagh on the floor much harder than necessary, and disappeared.

“Goodnight children,” said Madri Fey. “Off to bed.”

Rafe opened the door to his room and his breath caught in his throat. His bedroom had been duplicated down to the smallest detail. He’d been concentrating on his bedroom suite at home in England, but he hadn’t really expected the fairy to be able to reproduce it.

The first room in his suite contained a small piano and his bookshelves piled with sheet music. In addition, Rafe’s mother had furnished the room with a small sofa for relaxation, and a large wooden desk for his studies. Mounted on the sage green wall next to his closet, his fencing sabre, foil, and epee waited for their next use. Peeking through the open door on his right, Rafe saw his bed, nightstand, and wardrobe.

Sighing contently, he collapsed onto the sofa, catching a glimpse of himself in a large round mirror on his wall as he did so. He needed a good wash and some clean clothes. Rafe had just started pulling the strap of his leather satchel over his head when he heard a knock on his door.

“Come in,” he called.

The two little fairies flitted into Rafe’s room, carrying a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a glass of milk.

The girl fluttered her gauzy wings and smiled sweetly. “Hi. I’m Pepop. Are these kayo? “Do you want therno a kind of kiecoo, or do you want a wicksand steadin?”

“I beg your pardon?” said Rafe, standing. “I didn’t understand what you said.”

The fairies set the cookies and milk on a table next to Rafe’s sofa and scampered to his side. The each took one of his hands and swung them through the air excitedly.

“Don’t mind her,” said the little boy fairy, dropping Rafe’s hand and hopping on one foot. “That’s my sister. We’re twins, actually. Good things come in pairs, you know. Anyway, she tends to get things backwards. She calls herself Pepop even though her name is Poppe. She gets words with more than one syllable mixed up.”

“Good to know . . . but I’m still going to need a translation.”

“My sister said, ‘Hi. I’m Poppe. Are these okay? Do you want another kind of cookie, or do you want a sandwich instead?’ By the way, I’m Potts. I like your room. It’s very nice. Do you have a pet? The girl across the hall has a cat named Pebbles in her room. What’s your name?”

Rafe smiled at the fairy’s exuberance. “I’m Rafe and thanks, the cookies are more than enough. And no, I don’t have a pet.”

Potts scurried to a door next to the sofa and opened it. “Oh, Poppe,” he said, eyes wide with delight. “I’ve heard about these rooms. It is called a bathroom, and it has something called a tub and a shower. Having a bathroom is much better than having a cat. Really, Poppe, you have to come see this. What makes it smell so nice in here?”

“Soap, I imagine,” replied Rafe.

Potts emerged from Rafe’s bathroom, squeezing a tube of toothpaste. “Do you have any questions for us?”

Rafe retrieved the toothpaste from Potts’ hands, grateful the hyperactive little chap hadn’t removed the cap before squeezing it. “Well . . . I’ve always thought fairies were tiny creatures, like hummingbirds or butterflies.”

“We can be tiny like that, especially on Earth where we don’t want people to notice us, but we don’t have to be. Did you know that fairies can shape-shift just like the angels?” said Potts. “But

Poppe and I aren't good at it yet. Do you want to know anything else?"

"Not right now, thanks," said Rafe, sinking back onto the sofa. "I think I'm set for tonight."

"Come on, Potts. Take a hint. We need to ryhur," said Poppe. "It was ryve nice to meet you, Rafe."

The two little fairies skipped out of the room, leaving the door wide open. Rafe chuckled as he shut it. Fairies were apparently very energetic and kind of exhausting. Maybe that's what Seamus found so irritating about them.

He seated himself at the desk and wrote out the list of classes that Thomas requested for the morning. Then, feeling peaceful and blissfully happy, Rafe crawled into his bed and was asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow.



Chapter Thirteen

The Presidio

Hunched on the floor in a corner of his dark bedroom, Rafe clutched his mother's most treasured possession—an exquisite hand-carved puzzle box. The unique box could be separated into eight smaller boxes, and held many hidden compartments. The night before Rafe left for Maine, his mother gave him the box to remind him of home. In a fit of anger, he'd left it sitting on his bedside table, a silent, but not subtle, protest to his parents' decision to send him away.

Squeezing the puzzle box close to his body, Rafe rocked back and forth. It was little consolation now, but it was all he had left of his parents. Suddenly, his mother's soft voice spoke to him from the box, "Use me to keep your secrets safe." The words echoed over and over again in the darkness, but, as his mother's voice bounced around the room, it grew masculine . . . like the guy he'd met on the beach yesterday. What was his name again? Hmmm . . . Luke . . . yes . . . that was it.

Rafe's heart thumped in his throat as he woke with a start. Turning to look at his bedside table, he saw his mother's puzzle box right where he'd left it, but now a silver-serving tray sat beside it. The tray held a china teacup puffing swirling strands of steam into the air, and a china plate stacked with pancakes.

A card was propped against a glass of orange juice on the tray.

*Madri Fey arranged for your breakfast to appear when
you woke today.*

*She has also made sure that you have a fresh Ryder-
Knight school uniform.*

*Please put it on and meet me in the conservatory by eight
o'clock.*

Thomas

Rafe punched his pillow as last night's events came rushing back to him. How he and twelve other children could be stuck in a world situated someplace between the sixth and seventh heaven was beyond his comprehension! Yet here he sat.

Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, Rafe's feet hit the floor with an angry thud. Baylor was up to her ears in this mess. Terrible things *did* happen around her. It was no wonder that she had earned herself the nickname of the Sorceress. Rafe wasn't too happy with her at the moment, and he doubted anyone else was either.

Far too agitated to be hungry, Rafe ignored the food and pulled on his school uniform. He wanted some answers and he needed to get home. He glanced at the clock. It was two minutes to eight.

Grabbing the list of classes he'd written the previous night, Rafe started for the door. When he took his first step, he heard something crinkle. Lifting his foot, he discovered a folded piece of paper, which had been shoved underneath his door. He retrieved the paper and read the message scrawled across it in bold red ink:

NOTHING IS AS IT SEEMS.

FOLLOW THE CONNECTIONS AND YOU WILL FIND THE ANSWERS THAT
YOU SEEK.

Wait a minute. He'd seen this writing before. Whoever wrote it was the same person responsible for the warning written on his grandmother's fortune cookie. What in the blazes was going on around this place? Weren't things already complicated enough?

"Great, just great." He jammed the paper, along with his classes, into the pocket of his trousers.

When Rafe got to the arched bridge in the conservatory, he saw Blake running towards him. "There you are," Blake said. "Everyone's waiting for you. Thomas is going to give us a tour of the palace. Wait until you see. There's a new door at the end of the conservatory which, according to Thomas, leads right into one of the palace corridors."

Rafe clenched his jaw and puffed air into his cheeks, trying to hold his temper in check. "I don't want a tour. I just want to go home."

"I know. Baylor and I want to get back as much as you do. I already asked Thomas when we could go home. He said he's taking us someplace to get the answer to that question when we're done with the tour."

The two boys hurried to the gazebo where Rafe spotted the door Blake had mentioned. It was a huge ancient-looking wooden door framed by a large stone arch.

Trying to contain her hostility, Deidre pinched the bridge of her nose and clenched her jaw. "Can we go now?" she asked.

"Yes," said Thomas, pushing open the door.

The students, with the exception of Baylor, poured through the door ahead of Rafe and Blake. Blake poked her in the back, and she shuffled through the door after the rest of the youngsters.

"What's wrong with her?" whispered Rafe.

"Deidre and some of the other kids lit into her this morning. They blame her for us being stuck here."

Rafe heaved a sigh and nodded his head. He could commiserate.

“Don’t tell me you’re angry with her, too?” whispered Blake, catching Rafe’s arm. “Considering Thomas said we’d all be dead if we hadn’t been transported to Mystfira, I don’t think it’s fair for everyone to be so upset with her.”

Rafe bit his tongue. Although Baylor was his friend, she was the reason they were in this situation, and, at the moment, he felt just as angry as everyone else.

“Welcome to the Palace of Angels,” said Thomas as the Ryder-Knight students assembled in the palace hallway. “Since the four palaces interlocked, there are over two thousand rooms here. It is very easy to get lost so, please, stay close.

The students followed Thomas to a set of stairs and climbed their way to an empty tower room lined with long narrow windows. Rafe positioned himself at the nearest window and waited for Thomas to speak.

“From this side of the tower, you can see the island of Palades, where we were last night, and the ring of water surrounding it, which is known as the Sea of Umber.” Walking across the room, Thomas continued, “Over on this side, you can see the jarvar-tan village of Truvian and the Fairy Forest. Also, from certain windows, you can see portions of the new configuration of the palace and the surrounding grounds.”

The Sea of Umber shimmered in a spectacular shade of red, and Rafe found it hard not to be impressed, but Ebon did not feel the same way. “Umber is a reddish-brown pigment which contains iron oxide and manganese oxide,” he said to Thomas. “The name of your sea does not accurately reflect the color I see out there. It should be named the Sea of Coquelicot.”

Thomas pressed a fist to his lips to hide a bemused smile.

When he was able to contain his amusement, he said, "If you want to accurately pinpoint the color of the water, you will need a new name for our sea on a daily basis because it is a different shade of red every day. Until you learn more about Mystfira, it is too difficult to give you a scientific explanation, but for now, let us just say the color depends on the mood of the Palace of Umber Cascades, which lies beneath it."

"That makes no sense whatsoever," said Ebon.

"It does, if you consider the physics of Mystfira differ from the physics of your Earth," Thomas replied.

"Intriguing," said Ebon, shaking his head and scratching his temple.

Rafe walked to the other side of the tower and stood next to Thomas. The view from that window was stunning as well. A voluminous circular wall, protected by an enormous moat and drawbridge, sealed the palace off from the village surrounding it.

The palace grounds burst with lavish gardens linked by narrow pathways. Dotting the gardens were sculptures and fountains full of candles and flowers floating on crystal blue water. Interspersed among the beautiful statues stood the same grotesque gargoyle statues Rafe had seen at the Theoculus last night.

Oliver tugged at one of Thomas' sleeves. "Do those statues come to life, too, or is it just the ones of the gargoyles?"

"Statues do not come to life in Mystfira," replied Thomas with a faint smile, "unless the fairies are up to some of their mischief."

"There must be hundreds of gargoyles out there," said Rafe. "They're even on the walls."

"That is their job," replied Thomas. "The gargoyles were created to protect the angels and defend their palaces. Not all of the stone statues on the palace grounds are gargoyles, though. Some of them are just statues."

"How do you tell the difference?" asked Rafe.

"That is the point," replied Thomas. "It is difficult for anyone to tell the difference; therefore, it is less likely that enemies will attack us on palace grounds."

"I bet I can tell the difference when we get outside," said Gerand, the fireman from the previous night.

"I am sorry, but none of you will be permitted outside the palace. It is too dangerous," said Thomas. "That is why I brought you to the tower. It is a safe place to view the outside world."

"What are you talking about?" Gerand asked. "We were outside last night."

"Yes, but that was the day of the Summoning. It is the one day of the year all enemies and elements rest. It is the only day that the environment is safe for everyone in Mystfira—even humans."

Deidre's eyes grew as wide as saucers. "What's wrong with the environment here?"

"It is complicated. Mystfira is home to many creatures that were too dangerous to leave on your Earth. But for now, suffice it to say, we have weather that human beings cannot survive."

Deidre crossed her arms. "Please elaborate."

"The storms in Mystfira are extremely unpredictable and accompanied by ferocious winds and rains."

"That's not so bad," said Gerand. "We have those kinds of storms on Earth all the time."

"No," said Thomas. "Not the kind of storms that you experience on Earth. For instance, when it rains here, we never know *what* it will rain. It could be water, fire, iron, salt, or wax, and we never know if a poisonous vapor will accompany it."

"I see people out there in the village. How can it be safe for them and not for us?" Rafe asked.

"Those people are jarvartans, like me. Our bodies can withstand harsher conditions than your bodies."

"What about the angels then? Supposedly they have human bodies now," said Deidre.

"If you recall," Thomas said, "Madri Typhicus mentioned that their bodies would retain the angelic abilities necessary for their survival and training in Mystfira."

Looking down on the village, Rafe asked the obvious question, "If it rains fire, how come that village down there doesn't burn?"

"Our village is built from blocks of stone stronger than diamonds and a type of wood that withstands even the fire rain," replied Thomas. "Most wood will burn, but not the wood of the Ossignio tree."

"And the Fairy Forest," said Rafe. "How come that doesn't burn?"

"The flora and fauna of Mystfira have either adapted or developed defenses to the environment here."

Baylor looked as if she were on the verge of tears. "My hawk is outside," she whispered to Thomas.

"Do not worry," he replied. "The hawk is inside the palace and waits for us in the Presidio."

"I don't mean to be rude, Thomas," said Deidre, placing a hand on her hip, "but we'd all appreciate it if you could speed up this little sightseeing expedition of yours."

"What my cousin means is, we're all anxious to find out when we can go home," said Blake, poking Deidre with his elbow.

"As you wish," said Thomas. "Follow me."

Thomas proceeded to give the children a brisk, but informative, tour of the major areas of the Palace of Angels. Words were

insufficient to describe the splendor of the halls, salons, and galleries that the students viewed.

The Hall of Mirrors was Rafe's favorite. A beautiful mural of the Theoculus formed from shards of broken mirrors covered one entire side of the hall, and thousands of framed mirrors, in every size and shape, hung on the other side of the hall.

No one seemed to be enjoying the tour of the palace more than Oliver.

"Oh, my stars," he said, stopping to stare at a painting. "I have never seen a more exquisite example of *trompe l'oeil*. Look at that beautiful meadow. Doesn't it seem like we're standing in it? For anyone who doesn't know, *trompe l'oeil* is French for 'deceive the eye.' It's an art technique that causes something to appear as a three-dimensional object. Essentially, it's an optical illusion."

Although Rafe had never been one to appreciate art, it was hard not to share some of Oliver's enthusiasm for the Palace of Angels. There were meticulously carved doors and ceilings, elaborate artwork, ornate chandeliers, and expansive windows everywhere they looked. Even the floors in each room were works of art.

When the children rounded the corner of one particularly impressive hallway, they heard the animated conversation of other youngsters coming from a huge circular dining room where ten long tables were arranged like the spokes of a wheel. Each of the tables was packed with youngsters eating voraciously. Rafe had never seen such gluttonous behavior, but stranger still was what the students were wearing—the customary blue blazers, crisp white shirts, gold ties, and sweaters of Ryder-Knight Academy.

"Who are they, and why are they wearing our school uniforms?" asked Deidre.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"They are angels," said Thomas. "The uniforms are meant to provide you with something familiar in your new surroundings."

Deidre gave Thomas a cold stare. "How comforting," she said.

Rafe surveyed the students in the cafeteria with interest. "Some of those kids look a lot older than the ones we saw last night."

"That is correct," said Thomas. "The angels are divided into five groups. The ones in the beginner class are your age, but there are also advanced beginners, intermediates, skilled, and expert classes. An angel must complete all five levels to graduate from their training."

A young, fair-haired boy hurried past the Ryder-Knight students, his plate piled high with breakfast food. "You have to try those square things over there," he called as he passed them. "They're waffles and they're awesome!"

"For crying out loud," said Deidre. "You'd think they'd never had anything to eat before."

"As a matter of fact," said Thomas, "this *is* the first time the new angels have ever eaten human food, and last night was the first time they have ever *had* to sleep."

"If they're this excited about breakfast food, wait until they taste desserts," said Oliver.

Thomas led the children back out into the hallway.

"Please, I'd like to see Simon," said Baylor. "If you give me directions, I'll go there by myself."

"No need," said Thomas. "We are going there now."

Thomas led the children through another spacious hallway and paused in front of a large door embossed with mysterious gold symbols.

"I've seen markings like those before," said Rafe, touching

the symbols on the door with his fingertips. "They were in the sand around a fairy house on the Wingate estate. What are they?"

"It is Anfar, the language of the angels and fairies," replied Thomas. "The large symbols at the top of the door spell out the word Presidio, and, before you ask, the Presidio is the room where the Sakal convene to fulfill their responsibilities"

"And the smaller symbols underneath . . . what do they say?" asked Rafe.

"It translates: 'Live inside hope—the gateway to all possibilities.'"

It only took a moment for Rafe to decide that was the stupidest thing that he had ever heard. Hoping never made anything happen. Surely the angels knew that. Action made things happen, not hope.

"One of those possibilities better include getting us back to Earth where we belong," Deidre ranted.

Thomas ignored her outburst and opened the Presidio door.

When the children entered the room, they saw Madri Isabo standing in its center, with Simon perched on her fist. She had traded the gown she wore last night for a leather bodice and gladiator skirt that reminded Rafe of something a warrior might wear. The madri looked elegant yet formidable, as did the thick, round table next to her. The massive table, with twelve concentric circles carved into its polished top, had been positioned in the center of the room and surrounded by twelve equally substantial chairs.

The hawk squawked and greeted Baylor with a low bow.

"Hello to you, too, Simon," said Baylor, eyeing Madri Isabo's hand. "I hope he isn't hurting you with his talons."

"Going to an ungloved hand could be a bad habit for a hawk

to develop,” replied Madri Isabo, tossing Simon into the air, “but my skin is pretty tough, so perhaps you can forgive him this one time.”

The hawk soared up into the cathedral ceiling of the large curved chamber. He settled on the edge of one of the circular windows encompassing the top of the room and surveyed the state of affairs beneath him.

Rafe gazed about the unusual room. The circular walls surrounding the students contained numerous floor-to-ceiling murals, and large vases filled with flowers formed a thick border on the floor beneath the paintings, preventing anyone from getting too close to the artwork.

“What is up with all these stupid circles everywhere?” asked Deidre.

Thomas shook his head and looked at Madri Isabo. “Her name is Deidre. She can be challenging,” he whispered.

Madri Isabo acknowledged Thomas with a tight-lipped smile before answering Deidre’s question, “Circles symbolize many things to angels and fairies, but here, the circular shapes represent unity,” she said.

“Perfect,” said Deidre with a sarcastic tone. “So you’ll understand when I tell you that our group is *unified* in wanting to know when we can go home.”

“You will have your answers as soon as Madri Typhicus arrives,” Isabo said. “He will be here in a few moments. Until then, I suggest you children enjoy the Presidio wall.”

Deidre sighed and stalked away.

Blake motioned for Rafe to join Baylor and him next to a mural of a sturdy grey stone building featuring a large door with raised angelic markings, similar to the ones on the Presidio’s door.

Baylor shifted her eyes to her feet when Rafe arrived by their side. "See, I told you Rafe wasn't mad at you," said Blake, shooting Rafe a don't-you-dare-tell-her-otherwise-look. "Everything is going to be okay."

Head held down, Baylor looked at Rafe through her eyelashes, and he forced a smile. Then, feeling awkward, he tapped a heel and stared at the mural on the wall until Thomas made his way over to them, holding a fistful of papers.

"I hope you remembered to bring the list of classes I asked for last night," said Thomas.

Rafe dug into his trouser pocket and handed his list to Thomas. Blake and Baylor found their lists and presented them to Thomas, as well.

"What's up with all the paintings in this place?" asked Blake.

"Each picture is a scene from one of the twelve circles that form Mystfira. You are standing in front of a house in the jarvartan village. In our village, it is customary to write a person's description upon the door of their home or business. The symbols on that door say Layhish Taylah. Roughly translated it means 'the lion and the lamb.' Therefore, the person who is described on that door is a fierce protector but, at the same time, fair and gentle."

"And to think all we have at home are mailboxes with our last names written on them," said Baylor as Thomas walked away.

"That's probably a good thing. I can only imagine what the jarvartan would write on Deidre's door," said Blake in a hushed tone. "'Bossy cow' would be good."

"I was thinking more like 'honey badger,'" whispered Rafe.

Blake laughed. "You nailed it. Sweet and cuddly one moment, ready to rip your throat out the next."

"Be nice, you two," said Baylor.

Rafe high-fived Blake and strolled past the twins, pausing in front of a desert mural. Baylor hung back to admire a scene with a deep green valley filled with gorgeous waterfalls, while Blake stopped to look at some treacherous mountains covered with ice and snow.

Rafe examined the lava-spouting volcanoes dotting the desolate landscape of the mural before him. At first glance, he guessed the surface of the Presidio's walls had been painted with the *trompe l'oeil* technique that Oliver had mentioned earlier, but when fresh molten lava began to gush down the sides of one of the volcanoes, Rafe discarded that theory.

Moving closer to the circular canvas, Rafe felt the temperature in the room increase. He tugged at his collar as the air around the painting began to smell hot and unpleasant. Dark, angry red clouds formed over the desert scene, and an unexpected gust of wind lifted the hair from his forehead. Watching in bewilderment, the clouds began to spew fire and Rafe heard a soft sizzling noise as the fire rain hit the ground.

Leaning over the flowers, he stretched his index finger towards the mural, as close as the flower barrier would allow. The area around the painting blazed, causing him to withdraw his finger and press it to his tongue to cool it. Rafe scowled as he detected a caustic sulfuric taste.

Rafe swallowed hard and squinted at the mural in disbelief. As hard as it was for him to fathom, he knew he had just experienced the picture on the wall with all five of his senses, but . . . that was impossible.

"Do you see that?" shouted Blake, pointing at the mural in front of him. "It just started to snow on the mountains—and I think I see a yeti!"

"There is a giant wrestling with a dinosaur in a jungle

clearing over here!” yelped Oliver, who stood alone in front of another gigantic mural.

Rafe didn’t know which way to turn as more of the children started to cry out in alarm. He knew he couldn’t be going mad because everyone else seemed to be experiencing the same sort of thing.

Oliver motioned for Rafe to join him, so Rafe trotted to his side. Oliver hadn’t been exaggerating. There was a giant grappling with a dinosaur in the picture, and the dinosaur head was so close to them that Rafe could smell its rancid breath. He watched, dumb-struck, as the giant got hold of a large club that had been lying on the ground beside him and struck the dinosaur on its backside. The dinosaur roared and retreated into the distance.

With excited nickering, a winged horse descended from the sky and into the jungle clearing in Oliver’s mural. Four unicorns trotted out of the forest to greet the winged horse, white horns gleaming as they nuzzled one another.

Rafe spun a slow circle around the Presidio examining the other murals. He saw a jungle, a desert, bizarre rock formations, mountains, fields, waterfalls, strange forests, and a red ocean like the Sea of Umber. The forests and fields were chock-full of creatures of legends and lore—ogres, trolls, centaurs, satyrs, leprechauns, and fairies, not to mention other unusual creatures for which Rafe had no names. The creatures depicted in the pictures ambled about only in their own landscapes and did not move from mural to mural.

“How is this possible?” he whispered as the Presidio door opened with a creak.

“It’s not,” said Oliver, shaking his head, “but at least there are no vampires, werewolves, or zombies in those pictures. They scare me.”

"Vampires, werewolves, and zombies reside in the eleventh circle of Mystfira. Nightfall is the best time to catch a glimpse of those creatures," declared a familiar male voice. "After all, they prefer darkness."

The children turned to see Typhicus standing in the doorway, still carrying his ivory scepter from the previous evening. He'd exchanged his robes for trousers, cuffed leather boots, and a billowy-sleeved blue shirt cuffed at the wrists and belted at his waist.

"Ah," Typhicus said, closing the Presidio door behind him. "I see you have noticed our living landscapes."

Deidre stomped over to Typhicus. "We've all had enough of your silly funhouse tricks for today. We need to get back to school!" she bellowed.

"Yes," replied Typhicus. "I agree. We need to get you back to school as soon as possible. In the meantime, I'd like to assure you that your friends and family are safe. Madri Fey has cast a spell so that no one realizes that you're missing. We will return you to Earth with your new guardians once they are trained."

Blake gave Deidre a hard look meant to silence her. "Thank you," said Blake. "How long will it take to train our new guardians? We're all anxious to get home."

"Yes," answered Typhicus. "Time flows differently here in the heavens. Sometimes up, sometimes down, sometimes sideways, but, usually, it takes about fifteen minutes to train the new angels."

The group of students shared a collective sigh of relief, and Baylor looked as if an enormous weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"The angelic classes will begin later this morning, and you'll be taught by the finest teachers available anywhere in the cosmos," said Madri Typhicus.

Madri Isabo stepped forward. "We'll be able to provide you

with some fresh air, too, but you'll be confined to the grounds outside Cliff House, as it is the only area protected by the Blue Star. We're committed to keeping you children safe during your time here."

"Why would that be necessary? We obviously won't be here long enough to worry about teachers or fresh air," said Deidre. "You said classes start this morning."

Typhicus gave the children a perplexed look. "That's correct, but the new guardians need to complete all five levels of their training before they're qualified to leave Mystfira."

"By my calculations, even if it takes fifteen minutes per level to train the angels, we'll only have to stay here for one hour and fifteen minutes after the classes begin. We'll be home before lunch," said Deidre.

"Oh, dear," said Madri Isabo, turning to look at Typhicus. "I'm afraid the children are confused because their perception of time is so very limited. You'll have to explain it to them using their earthly concept of time."

"Of course. How foolish of me," said Typhicus, sounding annoyed with himself. "Allow me to clarify the matter of time for you. Picture time as a rubber band with the ability to expand and contract—"

Deidre thrust out her chin and raised a corner of her lip in contempt. "Please spare us the lesson on time and just tell us how much longer we have to stay here."

"Per *angelic* measurement of time, it takes fifteen minutes to train all five classes of angels, but using your *earthly* understanding of time, it takes a little bit longer."

"For crying out loud! Just spit it out!" shouted Deidre.

"Five years," said Typhicus.

Rafe nearly choked on his own saliva. "Five years?"

"That is correct," replied Typhicus. "Per your understanding of time, you will have to remain with us for five years."

"I can't be here for five years!" said Rafe. "None of us can. There has to be another way to get us home."

Typhicus surveyed the students with a compassionate expression. "I'm sorry. There is no other way."

"Oh, no, no, no! I am not going to spend the next five years here!" screeched Deidre at the top of her lungs.

The rest of the children erupted into furious tirades of their own.

"This simply won't do. I'm sorry," said Madri Isabo, reaching into a leather pouch at her side. She produced a small handful of glittery dust and blew it over the youngsters.

A sudden sense of well-being descended upon Rafe. He remembered that Typhicus had just told them that they would have to stay in Mystfira for five years, but, for some reason, he no longer cared. He was happy right where he was.

As the students quieted, Rafe remembered his interest in the wall paintings and returned to gazing at the one before him. The other children also seemed to have lost their interest in arguing with Typhicus, and, one by one, they wandered away to look at the murals.

Typhicus raised his eyebrows and looked at Madri Isabo. "What have you done," he asked.

Madri Isabo folded a hand across her waist. "The leprechaun suggested that some xant dust might come in handy if the children became hard to handle."

"You will *never* do that to the children again," said Typhicus in a harsh tone.

Isabo blinked and nodded in agreement, but she looked wounded.

Seeing Madri Isabo's demeanor, Typhicus softened his voice. "We're angels, Isabo, and angels do not practice arcane magic. It is beneath us."

"I'm sorry," replied Madri Isabo. "I was only trying to help."

"I know." Typhicus nodded. "I appreciate that and I suspect supervising these children will be exhausting for all of us, but we will have to try to manage them in the same manner their parents and teachers would on Earth."

"I understand, but I don't think we should share that bit of information with the children, Typhicus. If they think we are willing to use the xant dust when they get too emotional, they may be more cooperative," said Madri Isabo, tipping her head towards the students.

"Duly noted, but my decision stands. In any case, I think the students are composed enough to meet their new teachers now. Would you please escort them to the library?"

"Of course," replied Isabo.

Madri Isabo wasted no time corralling the students and placing them in line.

Rafe was counting fairies in the nearest mural while waiting for his turn to exit the Presidio when he felt Thomas squeeze his shoulder.

"I need to talk to you. You can catch up with your friends in a few moments," Thomas said in a low voice. "Did you know that you gave me more than your list of classes when you handed me your paper earlier?"

"I did?"

"You gave me another paper with the words '*Nothing is as it seems*' written upon it. It is important that you tell me who gave you that note," said Thomas.

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"I don't know who gave it to me," Rafe said. "Someone shoved it under my door while I was sleeping."

"That is impossible."

"It's the truth," Rafe said with a loopy grin.

The corners of Thomas' lips pulled into a frown. "That is impossible because this is Luke's handwriting and Luke is gone."

"Luke has to be around here someplace, especially if he's stuffing notes under my door," said Rafe, giving Thomas a playful poke with his finger.

"You do not understand. I could not leave the fairy ring to help him or heal his wounds. Luke died. I do not know how he could have gotten this note to you."

Rafe looked surprised. "Angels can die?" he asked. "How do you know?"

"I was his jarvartan. We know when we lose our angels. Listen to me, Rafe. If Luke found a way to get a warning to you, then you must take it seriously."

"Okay, but I seem to remember Luke telling you that he'd see you in Araboth. You can probably catch up with him there," said Rafe with a grin.

Thomas opened the Presidio door for Rafe. "I cannot go to Araboth any more than you can," said Thomas. "Go, find your friends now."

Rafe pranced out of the room, Thomas scowling after him.



Chapter Fourteen

The Library

Madri Isabo strolled through the palace hallway in a deliberate manner, gazing at the tapestries on either side of her. Every now and then, she lifted one and peered beneath it.

“What is she doing?” asked Rafe.

“She didn’t say, but I think she’s looking for something,” replied Blake.

“At last,” said Madri Isabo, pulling aside one of the wall hangings. Draping the tapestry over a cleverly disguised hook, she pulled open a large door. It creaked and a musty odor radiated from its gaping maw.

The madri pulled a few loose cobwebs from the corner of the doorway before disappearing through the dark opening. The children followed her down a winding stairwell, into a cramped underground tunnel lit only by old-fashioned torches.

A dim and drafty tunnel, like this one, should have inspired a little caution, but he felt excited. When Madri Isabo struck off into the murky channel, he and the other children followed along.

Oliver’s eyes sparkled. “We’re going to the dungeons, aren’t we?”

“There are no dungeons down here,” replied the madri. “This is the way to your first class.”

“What’s the class called, matey? Smuggling 101?” asked Rafe, slapping his thigh and pretending to drag a peg leg behind him.

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"No," said the madri. "It's called Geography of Mystfira."

"Hey, that class wasn't on my list," said Oliver. He took faster steps to match Isabo's brisk stride through the serpentine passageway.

"It is now."

"I'm supposed to be taking Introduction to Earth Sciences," said Oliver.

"I'm sorry about that, but I think you'll enjoy the angelic curriculum."

"But—but what about the classes I put down on my list?" exclaimed Oliver. "What about my art lessons? I have to have my art lessons!"

Madri Isabo glanced at Oliver's upturned face. "Calm down, little one. You will have your art lessons. You'll be taking classes with the seraphim."

Oliver beamed at the madri. "Did you hear that?" he called over his shoulder. "We're going to be taking classes with the angels."

"None of us are deaf. Of course we heard," said Deidre.

"So where are we going again?" asked Oliver.

"I told you. I am taking you to your first class, which is being held in the library of the jarvartan village," said Madri Isabo. "Since none of you can go outside, Madri Typhicus has had this old leprechaun tunnel reopened for your usage."

"Who is teaching the class?" asked Rafe.

"Madri Keva, the dominion madri, is teaching the class," said Isabo, opening a door and revealing another set of stairs leading up to the library. "Dominion angels collect and record every word ever written or uttered in the universe, and store them in the angelic library. There is no one better suited to answer the rest of your questions. When you are done with the class, Thomas and I will meet you back here in the tunnel."

The children climbed the steps to find Madri Keva waiting for them at the top of the stairs. Rafe recognized her because she was wearing the same ethereal turquoise gown she had on the previous night.

Oliver gazed at the madri in her V-waist gown with its long flowing sleeves. "Wow. You look like an angel."

Madri Keva laughed. "I should hope so." She flung the small train of her gown behind her as she turned to lead the students into the library.

The library was not at all like the resplendent palace from which the students had just come. It seemed to be nothing more than a huge empty building, reminiscent of an airline hanger. Scanning the vast space, Rafe noticed numerous colored lamp-posts scattered throughout the building. The closest lamppost to the children glowed bright red.

The clicking of the students' shoes echoed as they followed the madri across the gleaming white floor.

"Why is the floor glowing?" Rafe asked, tapping his toe on the strange surface.

"The floor is glass," said Madri Keva. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Baylor pointed up. "The floor isn't glowing. It's reflecting something."

Rafe's breath caught in his throat as he lifted his head. Smothered in glittering lights and crystal beads, the library ceiling glistened. Looking closer, Rafe saw the ceiling was actually one gigantic and elaborate chandelier composed of millions upon millions of sparkling lights, twinkling like stars in the night sky. What a stunning contrast to the starkness of the building beneath it!

"What is this place?" whispered Oliver when the group reached the lamppost.

Madri Keva rested her hand on the red lamppost and pointed

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to a small bronze sign. "We're standing in front of the fiction section of the angelic library. As you can see, each section is marked with different colored lamp posts."

Rafe shook his head. This was puzzling. Lampposts . . . but not a single book anywhere.

"If I wish to enter the fiction section of the library, I keep my hand on the lamppost and say, 'Enter angelic fiction section,'" said the madri.

Rafe and the other students found themselves standing on the other side of the lamppost, the room as empty as it had been before the madri spoke. Although surprised that his position next to the lamppost had changed, Rafe felt more concerned about the library's obvious lack of reading material.

A faint clattering noise arose in the distance.

"Excellent," said Madri Keva. "That should be the rest of our class."

Rafe turned towards the sound and saw a small group of students hurrying towards them, dressed in perfect Ryder-Knight attire.

"There were hundreds of new angels at the Theoculus last night. How come there are only about twenty-five now?" Rafe asked.

"You can see them from here?" said the madri. She narrowed her own eyes and studied Rafe's face. "You seem to have remarkable eyesight for a human child."

"My vision has definitely improved since I got here," said Rafe, meeting her gaze, "but I think it has something to do with that stuff everyone keeps blowing on us."

Madri Keva clasped her hands behind her back and walked a slow circle around Rafe, studying him. "Ah, yes. The xant dust. How interesting," she mused.

Madri Keva shifted her gaze away from Rafe as the angelic students entered the fiction section. "Welcome," she said. "We've been waiting for you."

At that moment, an incredible belch rose from the midst of the newly arrived students. The boy that had hurried past the Ryder-Knight students at breakfast clamped both hands over his mouth in shock.

"What just came out of him?" asked one of the other angels.

"Oh dear. Perhaps we should have arranged biology lessons with Madri Ezekiel first. He is much better at explaining these things," said Madri Keva.

"It's called a burp or a belch. You probably have gas from eating like a little piggy at breakfast time," said Deidre.

"Why do you talk to people so rudely?" whispered Blake. "We haven't even *met* them yet."

"Eructation is a common occurrence after one eats," said Ebon in his typical Spock-like manner. "The proper response would be to say 'excuse me' or 'pardon me.'"

"I disagree," said Deidre. "I think in cases of loud, obnoxious burps, an 'I'm sorry' might be the more appropriate response."

Ebon sighed. "She can be very disagreeable," he said to the new students standing next to him.

The boy's face flushed scarlet. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Rafe gave the boy a comforting smile. "It happens to everyone. Don't worry about it. By the way, my name's Rafe," he whispered.

The boy smiled. "Thanks. I'm Diadem."

"Let's begin, shall we?" said Madri Keva. "As I was saying, welcome students. I am Madri Keva."

Madri Keva surveyed the group of students staring at her.

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Her eyes came to rest on Audra and she said, "Young lady, please come here and stand next to me. Yes, you . . . with the unusual shade of hair. What's your name?"

"Audra Monroe." Her soft, long red-gold curls bounced against her back as she walked to Madri Keva's side.

"Audra, please tell me the name of a fiction book that you have read or would like to read, and the author's name if you can remember it."

"I love *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen," said Audra.

Suddenly, a book appeared out of thin air and tried to place itself in Audra's hands. The girl shrieked in surprise and batted the book to the floor.

Madri Keva retrieved the little volume and brushed it off with the sleeve of her gown. "The book will appear and place itself into your hands—that is, if one lets it."

Madri Keva placed the book on the floor next to her. "Open," she commanded.

The book gave a small shudder and, right in front of all their eyes, swelled to twelve feet in height and flew open. Audra screamed again and ran to stand behind Rafe and Blake.

"Welcome," said the open book in a pleasant voice to Madri Keva. "Please state your name."

"I am Madri Keva Dominion."

"Very good," the book replied. "Please choose a character and step inside my pages."

"No, thank you. I opened you for demonstration purposes only. You may close yourself now," said Madri Keva.

The enormous book whooshed shut, blowing the madri's gown and hair back. "You'll have to watch out when a book closes itself. It can be rather hazardous," she said, smoothing her hair into place and adjusting her gown. "In the angelic library, one

may choose a character, step inside the story, and experience the adventure as if one were that character.”

“That’s awesome,” said Oliver in a singsong voice. “It brings the book to life.”

“I’ve heard we can enter the story together in groups,” said Diadem.

“Yes, reading in groups is permissible. I suggest that you read the book several times, choosing to enter as a different character each time. It’s very enjoyable. Another interesting feature is that one may choose to experience the story as the author did when he or she was writing the book.”

“Why would that be interesting?” asked Blake.

“Are you kidding? Getting inside an author’s mind would be incredible,” whispered Audra. “For you, it would be like playing a game in your favorite athlete’s body and knowing what he was thinking and feeling during the game.”

“Oh,” said Blake. “I get it.”

“A brief word of warning,” said the madri in a very serious tone. “One must never enter a story unless one has clearly stated their name, and one must never fall asleep in the book unless it is part of the character’s story line.”

“When one of my parents was in training here, he said he fell asleep in *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling and got lost for days,” said a girl with a long brown ponytail. “Somebody had to go into the book to rescue him.”

“I haven’t forgotten that particular incident. That was Lemeuel,” said the madri with a chuckle.

“Yes, that’s right, and my name is Haven,” said the girl.

“Incidents like that *do* happen from time to time, especially before new angels realize how much their human bodies need to sleep,” said the madri, pressing her lips together in a tight line.

"We strongly advise everyone to be well-rested before using the angelic library. It makes the librarians quite cross when they have to retrieve someone from a book."

"I don't mean to change the subject. I am sure that experiencing stories may be desirable for some students," said Ebon, matter-of-factly. "However, I prefer to read books in the normal manner."

"Have no fear. As students, all other books will be read in the conventional way," said Madri Keva. The use of the angelic library by students is restricted to the fiction section.

The angelic students moaned their displeasure.

"I know, I know. None of you angelic students like it, but old-fashioned reading is part of the human experience," said the madri. "Now, students, we will access the traditional library."

As the madri said the words "traditional library," she clapped her hands. The emptiness surrounding the students disappeared. The library was now filled with rows and rows of shelves. Books, magazines, and papers of every type could be seen neatly stored on massive floor-to-ceiling units.

A long library countertop appeared, along with two adult men, wearing tweed jackets and serious expressions, who were in the process of taking books out of a box and placing them into neat piles on top of the counter.

"I've never seen so many books in one place," said Audra breathlessly.

"Please walk back to the tables behind you and sit down," said the madri.

Rafe and the other Ryder-Knight students sat at the row of tables nearest to them, and the other students filled in the rest.

"The two gentlemen that you see in front of you are Zane and Prentiss. They are our librarians, and they'll be happy to

assist you. What one doesn't know, the other will. I see that they have our textbooks nearly ready. Please form two lines and collect your geography textbooks."

Rafe got into line with the other children and watched as the two men passed out textbooks to the students ahead of him. They seemed to be opposites in every way. Zane had wild blue eyes and a headful of unkempt white hair. He tossed the textbooks to the students at a frantic pace. Prentiss had thoughtful brown eyes and tidy thick hair that had just begun to grey. He had a calm smile for each of the youngsters in his line.

Rafe collected his textbook from Prentiss and went back to his seat, where he thumbed through the pages. He loved geography on Earth, and this book did look interesting. Maybe he'd like geography here, too.

Madri Keva began the class by touching a small drawing on page three of the textbook she was holding. The next thing Rafe knew, the madri was carefully balancing the drawing on the tip of her index finger, and, to his surprise, she flicked it into the air. It rapidly enlarged to become a three-dimensional display suspended in mid-air.

Rafe recognized the twelve concentric rings that were hovering in front of him. He had observed the same rings on the table that morning in the Presidio.

"I am going to give you a very brief overview of Mystfira. The first ring is the Island of Palades," said Madri Keva, pointing to the center circle. "It is home to the Mount of Mists and the Theoculus where the Summoning Ceremony took place last night. The second ring is the Sea of Umber, home to the Palace of Umber Cascades. The third ring is called the Truvian Ring because it contains the jarvartan village of Truvian, the Palace of Angels and, of course, the library in which you are now seated."

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"I know about the fourth ring. It's called the Fairy Forest, and the fairies live in trees there. If you ask me, it's positively barbaric to live in a tree," said a plump girl with stringy blonde hair.

"Shhhhhh, no one asked you for your opinion, Shar," said an athletic boy with dark brown hair. "Although we all know you have one."

Shar crossed her arms and glared at the boy, while the rest of the children sniggered. "You can just be quiet, Malachi."

Madri Keva flashed the children a warning with her eyes. "The fifth ring is called the Ring of Rocks, and the sixth ring is another forest called the Weeping Woods. The seventh ring is called Mukrot. Mukrot is full of mud, quaking rocks, and the infamous Nomi tree."

"Is it true that the leaves of the Nomi tree are tiny green snakes?" asked the boy that Shar had called Malachi.

"Yes. The Nomi tree leaves are actually tiny green venomous snakes," replied the madri. "They are extremely nasty little creatures with vile dispositions."

The angelic students raised their eyebrows and exchanged appalled glances as Madri Keva continued, "The eighth ring is called the Valley of Waterfalls. The legendary Cliffs of Wisdom are located there. The ninth ring is called the Jungle of Equinox. It is home to winged horses, unicorns, dinosaurs, dragons, and giants, just to name a few."

"We saw living murals of those rings in the Presidio not more than a half-hour ago," said Deidre to the children sitting in the row opposite her.

"Students, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, and I will call on you," said the madri. "The tenth ring is very easy to remember because it is simply called the Desert. The eleventh ring is called the Ring of Ashlot, and it is full of pesky creatures

such as werewolves, vampires, zombies, centaurs, and satyrs, and that is by no means a comprehensive list. Lastly, the twelfth ring is known as the Ring of Ice. The yetis and the blanchilts live in the treacherous mountains there. In this class, we will study each ring in depth, and the angelic students will be required to take over-night field trips.”

Ebon raised his hand.

The madri acknowledged him with a nod. “Yes?”

“What are blanchilts?”

“Blanchilts are tiny insect-like creatures that live in the icy winds of the mountains there. A bite from a blanchilt afflicts the victim with a horrible burning pain for days. You’ll learn more about them in a class called Flora and Fauna of Mystfira,” replied the madri.

Madri Keva concluded her use of the diagram by showing the children two parallel lines beginning just outside the Jarvartan village and ending in the Mountains of Ice. It was a long gorge called the Valley of Shadows, which divided Mystfira nearly in half.

Rafe watched the angelic students huddle together and whisper. He could see that the Valley of Shadows was significant to them.

Madri Keva flipped through the pages of her textbook, searching for another illustration. When she found it, she touched the illustration and brought it out of the book on the tip of her finger again. She tossed it into the air and it linked itself to the last ring of the diagram already floating in front of the students. The diagram was another set of twelve concentric circles, but these circles were blazing with fire.

“I saw fiery rings like those when I was riding the moonlight last night,” said Rafe.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Madri Keva gave Rafe a strange look. "There is another training ground named Baeldavar right next to Mystfira. The two training grounds overlap in an area known as The Rocker."

Every angelic student in the room gasped in alarm.

"That can't be right," said one of the girls. "I've heard of Baeldavar. They train the dark spirits to fight against us there. Are you sure you saw it overlapping *our* training ground?" She turned to Rafe.

"Yes. My eyesight has been exceptional lately."

"Why would their training ground be so close to us? Why didn't somebody tell us?" asked another student.

"I'm telling you now," said the madri. "Your parents were not permitted to share that information with you."

"The only thing my parents told me was that Adomis takes place in the Rocker," said Diadem. "I can't wait to see it."

Rafe heard the students behind him whispering about Adomis.

"You will be pleased to know that the Adomis practice arena is located in the back of the library. It's a fifteen minute walk from here," said the madri as a trumpet blast sound. "Our time is up for today. Class is dismissed."

Suddenly, the massive library began shaking uncontrollably. A low moaning started somewhere outside the building and escalated into a ferocious howl.

"Are we having an earthquake?" asked Audra, pressing her palms on the table in front of her as the shuddering became worse.

"Prentiss and Zane, I'll need my things!" called the madri.

"It's the signal," Haven said, her brown ponytail swinging as she jumped up from her chair. The angel students scurried out of the library.

Madri Keva faced the Ryder-Knight students. "It isn't an earthquake. What you hear and feel signals the angelic students and the madrikim to assemble in the Valley of Shadows. I don't have time for a lengthy explanation now, but page sixty-four in your textbooks will explain it."

Prentiss pressed the cloak around the madri's shoulders, and Zane handed her the turquoise scepter. Madri tapped it on the floor three times and disappeared.

Ebon flipped open his book and began to read out loud.

"The Valley of Shadows is the true testing ground of angelic courage and strength. It is here that angels and jarvartan are prepared to endure and survive all naturally and unnaturally occurring forces, elements, and situations. All angels are required to go through this training, but it is particularly rigorous for archangels, guardians, carrions, thrones, principalities, and powers.

"The ground of Mystfira shakes, and the wind calls with unmistakable fury to signal the beginning of a training exercise. All angels and participating jarvartan must report to the training ground upon hearing the signal."

Rafe blinked as he recalled what happened in the corn maze. "Those people with Luke and Thomas yesterday . . . they were angels and jarvartans."

"Yes, in the corn field, when we were in the fairy ring," said Oliver.

"Of course," said Ebon, pointing to a picture in the textbook of young people facing a fierce wind. "This looks exactly like what we witnessed yesterday. The angels and their jarvartans were standing against the elements just like they were trained to do here."

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Oliver turned to look at Prentiss and Zane. "Are you Madri Keva's jarvartan?"

"We are librarians," said Zane, elevating his nose. "Prentiss and I are not assigned to one angel. We are appointed to serve the angelic community as a whole."

Prentiss smiled. "I am sorry, children, but we really do have to go now. Our entire village turns out to support the new angels the first time they are called into the valley."

"Please exit through the door next to me," said Zane, tapping his foot impatiently. "Turn left at the red lamp post and walk to the wall. The door to the tunnel is behind the gold mushroom tapestry."

The children hustled through the door, and Zane slammed it behind them with a thud.

Chapter Fifteen

Adomis



When the children stepped through the door, they found themselves standing next to the red lamppost, and, to their surprise, Thomas was waiting for them.

“Weren’t we supposed to meet you in the tunnel?” asked Oliver.

“Since the angels and their jarvartans are in the Valley of Shadows, I am taking you to the Adomis arena because, frankly, I do not know what else to do with you.” replied Thomas. “Let us walk.”

“We heard about that in class,” said Rafe. “The angels seemed really excited about it. Is it a sport?”

“Adomis is a small, but very serious part of what the angels do for humanity. No one in the heavens would ever trivialize it by calling it a sport, nor do we think of it as entertainment. We refer to it as a trial, and it is a way to test or prove angelic skills. There are only twenty-four angels appointed by the seventh heaven of Araboth who are allowed to participate in Adomis,” explained Thomas as the children followed him through the library.

“Plenty of professional athletes on Earth think of their sport as their work and they take it just as seriously,” said Blake.

Thomas rubbed his forehead. “I understand that, but the purpose of Adomis is not for amusement. Terrible things happen on Earth, and the angels do whatever they can to intervene. Adomis is an opportunity for them to release miracles into your

world, and, conversely, it is also a chance for the dark spirits to unleash disaster and havoc.”

“Dark spirits from the other training ground called Baeldavar?” asked Rafe.

“Yes, and from the underworld, as well. Seven times a year, the angels and the dark spirits square off against each other in an Adomis trial. Ahead of us is the practice arena,” said Thomas, pointing to a smooth round wall in the distance.

The youngsters trekked through the library with Thomas, passing lamppost after lamppost. As the wall got closer, Rafe realized it was the exterior of a gigantic and extraordinarily beautiful pearl. Gaping in awe, the students passed through an opening in the pearl. Thomas led them up a ramp and onto a large field surrounded by a yawning bowl of seats.

The field was divided in half by one white line, and hovering over the center of the field was a strange four-side board. The face of each panel on the board was divided into four sections, listing the scores, penalties, and something called the STOT. The last section at the bottom of the board contained the outline of fourteen small body-shaped figures.

“This sure looks like a sports arena to me,” said Rafe. “It’s even got spectator seating.”

Ignoring Rafe’s comment, Thomas ushered the students past the arena seating and led them towards a glass box at one end of the field. “This box is the private seating section and place of honor for the Board of Adjudicators. Every year, fourteen angels are appointed to occupy these seats. They are the angels who decide what miracles will be released into your world should the angelic team prevail in the arena. You will notice a similar box at the other end of the field. In the Rocker, that box would belong to the dark spirits.”

“Are there dark spirits in this arena now?” asked Oliver, looking around.

“Heavens, no. Dark spirits are not allowed in the library,” replied Thomas. He opened the door to the box and the children climbed into the spacious booth. There were fourteen comfortable seats, and Thomas motioned for the students to sit. “These boxes are made of druri-glass, the clearest unbreakable glass found in the heavens. Therefore, this is known as a druri box. The boxes lift and rotate around the field, providing the best views in the house.”

“I’d like to make friends with the angels on the Board of Adjudicators,” said Rafe, thinking about his father’s illness. “It might come in handy.”

Blake pointed to the board above the field. “What is a STOT?”

“STOT stands for ‘shots taken on target.’ Let me try to explain how Adomis works. There are eight members on each team. Seven are swordsmen and one is the archer.”

Deidre rolled her eyes. “We’re not going to have to watch a bunch of guys whack each other with swords and shoot each other with arrows, are we?”

“Adomis is much more civilized than that,” replied Thomas. “The concept and rules are fairly simple. There are seven swordsmen from each team positioned in the center of the field on either side of the white line. Three stand at the white line and they are known as spadroons. There are four more swordsmen positioned behind them and they are called bucklers.”

“I’m following you so far,” said Oliver.

“The Adomis match begins with each set of spadroons trying to eliminate each other from the match. When a spadroon manages to touch another swordsman ten times, the

unlucky swordsman must leave the field. Each time a spadroon touches another spadroon, one arrow is awarded to the archer on their team. When the spadroon defeats all the spadroons on the opposing team, they engage a buckler of their choice. Two arrows are awarded to the archer per touch of a buckler."

"They are only permitted to touch? Like fencing?" asked Rafe.

"Yes. If there is more than a touch, it is considered a penalty and arrows are withheld from the offending team's archer. When the blade touches the body of a swordsman, it causes a trumpet to blast and a distinctive mark is left on the uniform of the player. The mark will also be displayed on the corresponding scoreboard figure," said Thomas, pointing to the panel hanging over the center of the field. "When the spadroon has defeated his buckler, he leaves the game."

"But if there three spadroons and four bucklers," said Blake, "that means someone has to defeat two bucklers?"

"That is correct," said Thomas.

"So where does the archer come in?" asked Oliver.

"The archer is the most important member of the team. For every point the archer scores, the corresponding number of miracles can be released into your world. If the other team wins, they are permitted to unleash one torment into the earthly world for every point *their* archer scores. So you can see why it is imperative for the angels to win, or to at least tie, the match.

"I love archery," said Blake. "This is my kind of game."

"Adomis is not a game," Thomas said, pressing his lips together in a tight line. He pointed to a set of seven concentric circular hoops to the side of the druri box. "The archer remains along the side of the playing field next to one of the druri boxes,

waiting for their swordsmen to earn arrows. Then the archer fires the arrows towards a randomly lit circular target.”

Rafe examined the set of rings through the druri-glass. One moment, a bright yellow light lit one of the rings of the target, and the next moment, a different ring was lit. There was no particular timing or order to the illumination. He gave a low whistle. “It has to be over a hundred meter shot from the end of the field to the target.”

“Yes,” said Thomas. “It is an impressive shot, and what makes it even more remarkable is that the archer only receives a point when the arrow goes through the circle that is lit. Not only does the archer need significant physical skill, he or she needs to possess a highly-developed psychic sense.”

“That’s crazy,” said Blake.

“Psychic senses are rarely developed and used on Earth, so I can understand why you would think it is crazy,” replied Thomas. “At any rate, the Adomis match is won when all the spadroons and bucklers on the opposing team have been defeated.”

“Let’s see. That means the archer has one hundred-twenty chances to score points for their team by the end of the match,” said Tahj, the math genius. “So, potentially, that is one hundred-twenty miracles per game. You said that Adomis is played seven times a year, so it would theoretically be possible to release eight hundred and forty miracles into the world.”

“Correct,” said Thomas. “However, a high score in Adomis is considered anything over forty. It is phenomenally difficult for the archers to make those shots.”

“The angels are coming into the arena,” said Oliver, jumping up from his seat. “Look! They’re all wearing the same thing that Madri Typhicus and Madri Isabo were wearing at the Presidio, and they have their wings!”

"Yes, the angels do have their wings because Adomis takes place in the air *and* on the ground," replied Thomas as the angels took their place on the field.

As the angels on each side bowed to one another the surface of the arena assumed the form of a taut trampoline.

"What's up with the arena floor?" asked Rafe.

"Ah, yes." Thomas nodded. "Adomis takes place on a different surface each time there is a trial. It is one of the more interesting, but challenging aspects of Adomis. The most difficult match I ever saw took place on the head of a pin."

"How is that even possible?" asked Rafe.

"You will learn most anything is possible here in Mystfira, and speaking of learning, five of your teachers were here practicing when the angels of Mystfira were called to the Valley of Shadows. Madri Typhicus and Madri Michael are spadroons, and Madri Roanin and Madri Uriah are superb bucklers. Madri Isabo is the most outstanding archer the angelic world has ever seen."

A trumpet sounded and the spadroons engaged one another. The druri-glass box lifted from the ground and followed the angels around the arena. The speed of the box and the angels battling with one another was astounding. At first, Rafe felt a little queasy, but he soon became accustomed to the movement of the box and watched in amazement as the angels pushed aside each other's blades and dodged each other's attacks on the trampoline and in the air.

Finally, one of the spadroons landed a touch to his opponent's chest. It was feather-light and almost imperceptible to the eye. A sharp blast of a trumpet sounded and a red mark appeared on the player's blue shirt and on the scoreboard, as well. The archer collected his arrow and sent it whizzing past the druri box

and through one of the hoops but, alas, it was not the ring that had been lit.

By the time Adomis ended, Rafe had lost track of time. It had been a tough match, and neither archer had scored a single point, even though one of the archers had fired one hundred twenty arrows at the target.

“When will we get to see an actual game?” asked Oliver.

Thomas sighed. “It is not a *game* and you will never be able to go to an actual Adomis trial. It is played in the Rocker, an area where Baeldavar and Mystfira overlap, and I have told you . . . none of you are permitted to leave the grounds of Cliff House. You should not even be in this library, but the angels felt they could protect you here. In addition to that, the last Adomis match of the season was played a week before you arrived in Mystfira. There will be no more until spring.”

“Well, that’s just stupid,” said Blake. “It’s the first thing I’ve been interested in since I got here.”

“I loved riding in the druri box,” said Oliver. “It was the best part of the game.”

“I am only going to say this one more time. Never call Adomis a game, particularly in front of the angels. It is considered offensive. You can call it a trial, a battle, a competition, or even a match, but it is *not* a game.”

Oliver threw his hands up in the air in an apologetic gesture. “Okay, okay, okay.”

Thomas produced a pile of papers from his pocket. “I am going to take you back to the palace to eat lunch now, but, before I forget, I have your class schedules. Please come forward when I call your name and collect yours.”

When Rafe received his schedule, he couldn’t make sense of it. Except for his piano lessons, his schedule didn’t resemble

the list of classes that he was to going to take at Ryder-Knight Academy.

<i>Geography of Mystfira</i>	<i>Madri Keva</i>
<i>Angelology</i>	<i>Madri Estel</i>
<i>Sacred Geometry</i>	<i>Madri Fey</i>
<i>Flora and Fauna of Mystfira</i>	<i>Madri Ezekiel</i>
<i>Music Composition</i>	<i>Madri Avalon</i>
<i>Advanced Ballroom Dance</i>	<i>Madri Avalon</i>
<i>Piano Lessons</i>	<i>Madri Roanin</i>
<i>Beginner Sword Skills</i>	<i>Madri Isabo</i>

Thomas led the group back to the palace and Rafe edged up next to him. "There seems to be a few mistakes with my schedule of classes."

"I am sure there were no mistakes," replied Thomas. "The angels did not simply rely on the lists you children provided to us this morning. A dominion angel was dispatched to Earth, and everyone's background was thoroughly researched. The angel curriculum is quite different than yours. The Sakal came up with the best matches that they could."

"But . . . I don't dance."

"If you could not dance, you would not have been assigned to a dance class," replied Thomas, "particularly an advanced class."

Rafe glanced over his shoulder at the other children and whispered. "I didn't say I *couldn't* dance. I said I *don't* dance."

"You can talk to Madri Typhicus later, but I doubt it will change anything."

With a frown, Rafe folded the paper and stuck it in his back pocket. He didn't like the idea of a dance class at all. Evidently, the dominion angel had discovered the private dance lessons he'd taken from his mother.

During lunch, a glum feeling settled over Rafe, and his previous cheerfulness faded. When he looked at the sullen faces of the other Ryder-Knight students, he realized he wasn't the only one feeling low.

When the students finished eating, Thomas accompanied them back to the butterfly conservatory. "It is time for me to join the others in the valley, but have no fear. You will not be alone. There is a unit of gargoyles stationed around the house to watch over you."

Before the children could argue, Thomas stepped through the magical door and shut it behind him.



Chapter Sixteen

Capturing a Xant

Deidre tugged on the magical door to the palace, but it would not budge.

“What are we supposed to do now?” asked Oliver, placing his hands on his hips and looking grave.

“I don’t know and I don’t care. I’m going to my room,” said Deidre. She flounced down the stone path in a dramatic huff, but only took a few steps before she tripped and fell.

Rushing to Deidre’s side, Blake helped his cousin back up to her feet. “Way to go, Grace,” he teased.

“Look, I’ve skinned my knee and it’s bleeding,” howled Deidre. “Who pried up those paving stones?”

“I don’t know, but it’s lucky you fell over the stones and not into that hole.” Blake pointed to a gaping cavity in the walkway in front of them.

Hearing a suspicious rustling in a thick, leafy rubber tree plant nearby, Rafe peeked behind it. “We’ve got company. It’s the two little fairies from last night.”

Blake stalked over to the plant and pushed the leaves aside. “Stop sneaking around and come out here this instant. Did you two pry up those paving stones?”

Potts emerged from behind the plant, holding his sister’s hand. “We weren’t sneaking. We heard that you had an indoor garden with butterflies, and Poppe and I wanted to see it.”

Poppe nodded her head and gazed at the butterflies overhead. "I love fliesterbuts."

"Besides, we didn't think anybody would be home. Why aren't you at the Valley of Shadows with everyone else?" asked Potts.

"Not that it is any of your business, but we aren't allowed to go outside," snapped Deidre.

A look of surprise flickered across Potts face. "Really? Oh, well . . . at least you don't have to go to the Valley of Shadows. The angels have to go at least twice a week, and they never know when they will be called there. Sometimes it even happens in the middle of the night when they're trying to sleep. It takes them a long time to learn what they're doing, too. At first, they can't even stand on the rocks and the lightest breeze knocks them over, but at the end of their training, they're experts and they can stand against the fiercest winds or storms—"

"Enough babbling. Does Madri Fey know you're here?" asked Blake.

Potts tilted his eyes upward. "Not exactly."

"You shouldn't go into other people's homes and destroy their property," said Deidre, "but besides that, and more importantly, I could have been seriously injured because of you two."

"We didn't hurt anything," said Potts, pushing his lower lip forward. "We just forgot to close the door of the leprechaun tunnel. We were going to close it when we left."

"What are you talking about?" asked Rafe, peering into the hole. "This is a leprechaun tunnel? Where does it go?"

"It goes back to the Fairy Forest where we live."

"Look, Potts," said Poppe, her eyes wide with concern as she watched Deidre blot her knee with a tissue. "The poor thing has

a cut on her knee. Her body would be gerstron if she caught a xant like we did.”

“I know it would make her stronger but, Poppe, don’t you remember? We’re not supposed to talk about xants. It’s forbidden.”

“But it would keep the renchild from tingget hurt and then they could go sideout. We caught a xant when we got here, and now we can go sidein or sideout and not get hurt.”

“I know it would keep the children from getting hurt when they went outside, but we aren’t supposed to talk about it,” said Potts, trying to cover his sister’s mouth with his hand. “You’re going to get us in trouble.”

Rafe’s spine snapped to attention. “We were told we couldn’t go outside because our bodies can’t withstand the conditions here in Mystfira. Did you just say fairies can’t go outside either?”

“That’s right.” Poppe nodded. “Not tilun we catch a xant.”

“We’re not supposed to talk about xants, but I suppose if you don’t tell anyone that we told you . . . maybe we could tell you some stuff,” said Potts. “You see, fairies have very delicate bodies, but the xants protect us and strengthen our magical abilities. Madri Fey takes all of us to where the xants live, and we catch one. Then we can go wherever we want safely. Show them, Poppe.”

Poppe turned around and Potts brushed her hair to one side, revealing what looked like a tattoo on the back of her neck. Rafe stepped closer to examine the strange marking and saw three interlocking spirals with a hollow triangle at its center pulsating on the fairy’s flesh. Suddenly, the mark wiggled and crept up the back of Poppe’s small neck, close to her hairline.

“What is that thing?” asked Rafe, recoiling in surprise. “Does it hurt?”

“I told you, it’s a xant,” Potts said. “Of course it doesn’t hurt

us. It keeps us safe. It's hiding because it doesn't like being stared at by everyone."

Poppe lifted her shoulders to her ears and giggled.

"It tickles her when it gets squirmy."

Rafe's brain spun with possibilities. If he could catch his own xant, the odds were that he'd probably be safe in Mystfira too, and if he could get outside the castle, then maybe he could find someone who knew how to get him back to Earth . . . and if he were really lucky, he'd find a way to take a miracle back with him for his father. There had to be a way to leave Mystfira before the new guardians were trained, and Rafe meant to find it.

"Where do we go to get one?" asked Rafe in an urgent tone.

"I am not telling you," said Potts. "Don't say another word, Poppe. We've already told them too much."

Deidre elbowed Rafe out of the way, limped to a halt, and pointed a finger at Potts. "If you don't tell us everything we want to know," she said in a low-pitched shrill, "I'm sure Madri Fey would be very interested in hearing about how your little visit to Cliff House resulted in an injury to my knee."

"You wouldn't," said Potts, sounding horrified. "It was an accident."

"Sadly, she is not above using blackmail," whispered Baylor.

"Fine. Xants live in a cave in the fifth ring, the Ring of Rocks."

Poppe nodded her head. "When they come out of the caves, you can grab one."

"Then it's settled. I'll change out of my uniform and you'll take me there," said Rafe.

Blake looked around at the other Ryder-Knight students and then back to Rafe. "We all go or no one goes."

"I'm definitely going," said Deidre. "I am not going to be cooped up like a caged bird for the next five years."

The students all voiced their assent, except for Ebon, who seemed to be the sole voice of reason. "Hold on, everyone. We've got some very large issues standing in our way, and I'm not just talking about the ones surrounding us," he said, pointing to the gargoyles stationed around the conservatory windows. "It will be impossible to leave here without the gargoyles noticing us, and even if we did somehow manage to leave, we run the risk of being seriously hurt if it starts raining anything but water out there."

"We can take you through the chaunrelep neltuns. Then no one will see you leave," Poppe said.

"No, we cannot take them through the leprechaun tunnels," said Potts through clenched teeth, giving Poppe an aggravated look. "Madri Fey gave us strict instructions to stay out of mischief."

Poppe caught her brother's hand and squeezed it. "But Potts, it is safe to take them now. It will not rain while the gelans are in the leyval."

"I know it won't rain while the angels are in the valley, and it will be nice outside," said Potts, twisting his mouth to one side.

"Why won't it rain while the angels are in the Valley of Shadows?" asked Rafe. "What does she mean?"

"It is always nice outside when the angels are training because the elements are summoned to the Valley of Shadows with them," replied Potts. "You know—like fire, wind, rain, earth, and even the sea."

"So it is safe to show them how to catch a xant now," said Poppe. "They will be kayo with us."

"I know they'll be okay with us, Poppe, but . . . but . . . I don't know. We don't want to make Madri Fey mad at us again."

Deidre cupped her hands around her knee and jabbed it close to Pott's face.

Potts shuttered and looked at his feet. "Well . . . um . . . um . . . maybe we could . . . if you promise not to tell anyone we took you there," he said.

"We won't," said Rafe. "The angels purposely kept this information from us, so who knows what else they're keeping from us. Someone out there might know how to get us home."

"Fine," said Deidre, "but I'm not wearing this skirt. I'm changing out of my uniform before we go."

Blake glanced at his watch. "Okay, we'll all change and meet back here in ten minutes."

As soon as the students returned to the conservatory, Rafe and Blake lowered themselves into the tunnel along with Poppe and Potts. The passageway had an arched roof and enough space for two people to comfortably pass by one another. It looked very similar to the dank tunnel Madri Isabo had taken the children through earlier that morning.

A rickety wooden ladder leaned against the lip of the paving stones and led up to the conservatory. "You used a ladder to get in here?" asked Rafe, scratching his head. "Don't you two know how to fly?"

"Yes, but we were pretending to be pirates on the way here. We wanted to make a swashbuckling entrance," replied Potts.

Rafe choked back a laugh.

"Sheez, Ryder. That's so totally obvious. They were making a swashbuckling entrance," said Blake, rolling his eyes at Rafe.

Since the flimsy ladder would have snapped under the weight of anyone larger than the fairies, the students stepped onto Blake's shoulders and Rafe helped them jump to the ground.

After all the children were safely in the tunnel, Potts climbed the rickety ladder and pulled the cobblestones back over the hole with a great deal of grunting and groaning. Then, as the children

crept through the passageway with the two fairies, Potts told the children about the leprechaun tunnels.

The ground beneath Mystfira was rich with gold, and the leprechauns had developed a vast network of honeycombed tunnels to mine the precious substance. When they had exhausted all the gold from a particular tunnel, they finished the tunnel in stone as a reminder to themselves that they had already stripped the area.

Potts went on to explain how the fairies used the leprechaun tunnels to sneak unnoticed around Mystfira. It also appeared that the tunnels served as elaborate playgrounds for the fairies. They created fantastic make-believe games and acted them out in the passageways. As far as Rafe could tell, fairies spent a good bit of their spare time playing, daydreaming, and aggravating leprechauns.

Soon the children reached the end of the passage, a cavernous room on the lip of a high rock ledge. At the end of the ledge sat a large, elongated boulder with rough niches carved into it. The fairies scrambled up the crude steps and through a dirt cavity that led up to the surface.

Following the pair of fairies, the students wriggled through the hole and emerged onto a pile of rocks.

Rafe brushed the dirt off his clothes. "Where are we?"

"We're in the fifth ring just outside the Fairy Forest," said Potts.

Poppe pointed to something behind Rafe. "Look, you can see where we live from here. Our house is over there."

Rafe glanced over his shoulder and caught his first glimpse of the Fairy Forest. The trees looked like giant cotton candy clouds, all wispy and brightly colored. Not a single green leaf could be seen, just billowy puffs of color.

“Our house is the red tree with the shoes,” said Potts, pointing to a fluffy red tree with smooth grey bark, strung with every type of shoe imaginable.

Each tree in the Fairy Forest dripped with pretty baubles, which had been looped, laced, or wound about their branches. Most of the elaborate decorations had been fashioned out of ordinary everyday objects such as spoons, seashells, rocks, and sponges, and each tree had its own unique theme.

“You should see the inside of our house,” Potts said. “We have a twisty slide that goes from the top of the tree to the bottom so we don’t have to climb down steps. Do you want to go see it?”

“Perhaps another time,” said Rafe. “We need to go find the xants now.”

“Yes, we do. Baylor and I will take the lead with Poppe and Potts,” said Blake, taking Baylor’s hand and pulling his twin towards him. “Rafe, you hang back, and make sure we have everyone.”

“I think I speak for all of us when I say—we will follow you, but we won’t follow her,” said Deidre, stabbing her finger at Baylor.

Blake flattened his lips, thrust out his chest and glared, first at Deidre, and then at the others. “Let me make this very clear. Anyone who has a problem with Baylor has a bigger problem with me. Now—I am walking down this trail with my sister. Feel free to join us or turn around and go back to Cliff house.”

Deidre and Blake continued to glare at one another until Ebon interceded. “If you two continue to be gridlocked, we will not accomplish our goal.”

Turning his back on his cousin, Blake pulled Baylor down the path with him. One by one, the Ryder-Knight students passed by Rafe and began to follow Blake and Baylor.

The dark-haired firefighter from the previous evening was the last to pass and Rafe fell into step next to him.

Rafe smiled and stuck out his hand. "In case you don't remember, I'm Rafe."

"That's right," said Gerand, grabbing Rafe's hand and pumping it a few times, "and I'm Gerand Rial, but most people call me Rand."

"Okay, Rand it is," said Rafe, turning a bend in the trail and stopping short at a magnificent rocky archway. "Whoa!"

The fifth circle might be called the Ring of Rocks, but the name didn't do it justice. To one side, orange and yellow blade-like columns of rocks rose from the landscape, looking like a primeval forest of stone. On the other side, vertical blocks of massive black hexagons rose from the earth in odd step-like patterns, interlocking with one another. In the distance, enormous sheets of stones streaked with blacks, purples, and reds broke like ocean waves against the sky, and beyond those strange stone waves, bizarre conical rocks spiraled upward in a vast array of colors. In his wildest dreams, Rafe could not have imagined the incredible terrain spread before him.

"Whoa, is right," said Rand as they set off down the trail after the others.

"Pssstt," hissed a voice from a rocky crevice close to Rafe and Rand. "I seem ta be stuck in 'ere, and I can't reach me shillelagh."

Rafe peeked into a narrow crack in the rock ledge. "Seamus?"

Cheek pressed against a wall of rock, the pudgy little leprechaun stood sandwiched between two rock walls. His shillelagh lay on the ground next to him, but he was so wedged into the fissure, he couldn't bend over to pick it up.

"Shhh," said Seamus. "Don't call attention 'ere. I just need me shillelagh."

Rafe squeezed his arm through the crack and felt for the wooden stick. When he got a grip on the shillelagh, he tilted it towards the leprechaun until Seamus managed to grasp it. Tapping it on the ground, Seamus materialized in front of Rafe and Rand.

The leprechaun pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow. "Ya shouldn't be 'ere. What brings ya out ta dis ring?" he asked.

"Poppe and Potts are just showing us around," replied Rafe.

"Ya see, der would be yer first problem," Seamus said. "Ya don't ever follow fairies. 'Tis guaranteed ta get ya inta trouble."

Rand laughed. "We weren't the ones stuck between the rocks. What are you doing here?"

Seamus pointed to a cliff in the distance with his shillelagh. "I came ta see dat. It shouldn't be up der."

Rafe and Rand looked in the direction Seamus was pointing. A gigantic tree, at least ten stories high, sat perched on a lofty cliff in the distance, the only green thing to be seen anywhere in the Ring of Rocks. Held up by a massive trunk and gnarled roots, the extraordinary tree spread a leafy green canopy over the cliff, but what really piqued Rafe's interest was the wreath of flames which formed a boiling red circle around the base of the tree.

"What's burning around it?" asked Rand.

"Hell's Tongue. Da Sakal put it der ta protect da tree. Dat tree was shrunk inta a staff and broken inta seven pieces long ago. Da pieces were scattered throughout da universe. Someone found da pieces and put da staff back together. Dey drove it inta da ground on da cliff last night, bringin' da tree back inta existence."

"Is that a bad thing?" asked Rafe.

"Ya cannot even imagine," said the leprechaun. "Dat tree is da Tree of all Knowledge, and someone went ta da trouble of placin' it next ta da Well of Wisdom. If da water from dat well

is used ta bathe da roots of dat tree, da tree will blossom and a solitary piece of fruit will sprout from da trunk of da tree.”

“What’s the big deal?” asked Rand. “Trees produce fruit all the time.”

“If da wrong person eats it, such as a dark spirit, der would be dire consequences.”

Rand knocked his knees together and pretended to quake in his boots. “Next, you’ll be telling us that the heavens and Earth will pass away and darkness will reign forever.”

“Dat is exactly what will occur, and ya *should* be scared,” said the leprechaun. “The danger is real.”

A voice echoed around the children. “Danger—ger—ger. Real—al—al.”

The startled students froze in their tracks, trying to locate the source of the sound. Rafe couldn’t see a thing until a gust of air tapped Seamus’ hat off his head and onto the ground.

“Stop dat!” shouted the leprechaun, bending to retrieve his hat. “What do ya tink yer doing? I’m not playin’ with ya.”

“Playin’—in’—in’.”

Rafe felt a warm current of air on the back of his neck, as if someone were standing behind him and blowing on it. Suddenly the two fairies were lifted off their feet and tossed to and fro.

“I said knock it off!” hollered Seamus. “We didn’t come ta play.”

“What is that?” asked Rafe.

“‘Tis da Parrot Wind,” said Seamus. “A nuisance, if ya ask me. Right now, tis listenin’ and learnin’ how ta communicate with ya in yer own language.”

The little fairies floated to the ground, and a beautiful wreath of braided flowers wafted into view. The wind puffed the wreath over to the fairies and it settled onto Poppe’s head.

Rafe frowned at Potts. "I thought you said that all the elements were in the valley with the angels."

"Oh, no," giggled Poppe. "Not the Rotpar Wind. It does not go to the leyval with the gelans."

"She's right," said Potts. "The Parrot Wind doesn't go to the valley with the angels because it would never hurt anyone. It's very friendly."

Poppe puckered her lips and deposited a kiss into the air. "Thank you for the werflos."

The wind wove through the crowd of children and whispered, "Dark—ark—ark . . . spirit—it—it. Danger—ger—ger . . . real—al—al."

"Why does it keep saying that?" asked Rafe.

"It must have overheard someone talking about dark spirits. It doesn't know your language yet, but it will learn each time it hears you speak," Potts explained.

The leprechaun tightened his grip on his shillelagh and shook his head. "Janey Mack, ya'll be sorry when it learns yer tongue."

"Sorry—ry—ry."

"Clear off!" shouted Seamus, shaking his shillelagh in the air.

"Off—off—off," huffed the wind as it faded into the distance.

"Come on," said Poppe to the children. "We are mostal there now."

"Yes. We're almost there. It is just around this rock," said Potts.

Turning the corner, Rafe saw a large clearing blanketed in desert sand. Across from the sandy area were two caves with gaping dark mouths. Floating in the air above the sand, vividly colored red, blue, yellow, and green gelatinous creatures the size

of coconuts propelled themselves through the air in rhythmic contractions. Occasionally, they would stop pulsating for a few moments and allow themselves to drift towards the ground, like a leaf falling from a tree. Then, just before they touched the ground, the creatures would throb and surge back into the air. At other times, they congregated together to form incredible aerial displays of art.

Poppe fluttered into the air. "Those are xants."

"Aren't they pretty?" asked Potts.

"You should see them at night. They glow in the dark," Poppe said.

Seamus looked surprised. "'Ow would ya know that? Yer not supposed ta leave da Fairy Forest after dark."

Poppe widened her eyes and blinked. "What I meant to say was—I *heard* they glow in the dark."

"You need to catch a green xant, and you have to catch it while you're on the sand," said Potts. "Madri Fey says we aren't allowed to catch them in the rocky areas near the caves."

"Right, and we notcan go in the caves to get a xant," said Poppe, shaking her head.

"What do you do after you catch the xant?" asked Rafe.

"All you have to do is to hold on to it and then it becomes a part of you," replied Potts.

"Then you will be safe in Firamyst, like us," said Poppe.

"Let's go," said Blake, striking off.

The students crossed the sand and approached the xants. The creatures appeared to have no fear of them. They continued frolicking and cavorting through the air in their strange ballet. Although their colorful bodies pulsated in a rhythmic manner, there was nothing predictable about their movements.

Seamus seated himself on a comfortable stone by the

entrance of one of the caves. "Dis should be interestin'. If anyone should ask ya, I want ta go on da record as sayin' I advised ya against doin' dis."

The Ryder-Knight students soon learned that xants were more elusive than soap bubbles on a breezy day. Unafraid of capture, the red, blue, and yellow creatures would often purposely float in front of a green xant to hide it. When Rafe finally managed to get his hand on one, it slid out of his grip.

Poppe and Potts took to the air and tried to herd the green xants towards the students, but they were not very good at it. The leprechaun guffawed as he watched the xants stage escape after escape.

Finally, another green xant came within Rafe's reach, and he threw himself through the air to capture it. He landed next to Baylor with nothing to show for it, except a mouthful of sand.

Baylor sank to the sand in front of Rafe and hugged her knees to her chest. "I'm exhausted and I haven't even come close to getting one yet."

"I haven't, either," said Rafe, pushing to his knees.

At that moment, a large green xant drifted to the ground in front of Rafe. He tried to tackle it and missed, but, in doing so, he drove it straight into Baylor's arms.

"Hold on to it. It's slippery!" Rafe cried.

Baylor held fast to the xant as it writhed in her hands. Suddenly, it ceased moving and disappeared. "Where did it go?" she asked.

Poppe and Potts flew to Baylor's side, and Seamus came running, too.

"You got a xant! It is part of you now!" squealed Poppe in delight.

Potts moved Baylor's long dark hair to the side. "Let me see your neck," he said. "Yes, indeedy. You have yourself a xant."

The children gathered around Baylor. Three interlocking spirals with a hollow triangle center, identical to the fairies', now appeared on Baylor's neck.

Seamus reached his hand down to help Baylor to her feet. She smiled and extended her hand to the leprechaun. He stared at the red V burned into her wrist as he pulled her upright. "Vexxon," he muttered.

"What was that?" asked Rafe.

"Nothin'," replied Seamus.

"Hey, you guys! You need to come over here!" shouted Deidre.

Every head turned to see Deidre and Parker waving from the mouth of the cave, motioning for the others to join them.

"Look inside," said Deidre as her fellow Ryder-Knight students rushed to the cave. "It's overflowing with xants. There are plenty of green ones and they're not even moving. We'll have a much better chance of catching one inside this cave."

Poppe fluttered her wings. "You notcan go sidein the caves to catch xants."

"Poppe is right," said Potts. "Madri Fey said that we have to catch the xants on the sand. The rules say we can't go inside the caves."

"Why can't we?" asked Deidre. "We don't have wings like you two, so it's hard for us to catch a xant out there."

"Well," said Potts, looking at the children. "I suppose . . . it might be okay."

Seamus marched to the entrance of the cave and flung his arms out to the side to keep the students from entering. "Don't ya dare go inta dat cave! Der er rules about dese tings fer a good reason!"

Deidre moved one of Seamus' arms and strode into the cave. "Everyone, follow me," she called.

The leprechaun caught Baylor's wrist in his hand as she tried to enter the cave behind the other students. "Please, don't go in der. Ya already 'ave yer xant."

"I know, but since I'm the reason they're all stuck here, I have to do whatever I can to help them," said Baylor, shaking her wrist free of the leprechaun's grip and entering the cave.

Seamus kicked the loose stones on the ground and paced back and forth in front of the cave. Poppe and Potts stared at his antics with apprehension.

"Stupid fairies! What er ya lookin' at?" asked Seamus, picking up a stone and hurling it at them.

"Come on, Poppe," said Potts, grabbing his sister's hand and flying into the xant cave after the children.

Seamus turned in a circle, stamping his foot. "Janey Mack! Janey Mack! Janey Mack! I don't want ta be involved in dis!" shouted Seamus. Quivering with anger, the leprechaun tapped his shillelagh on the ground and disappeared.

The moment the Ryder-Knight students entered the cave, the xants moved towards the ceiling and fled deeper into the cavern through a large gap in the wall. Undeterred, the children followed them to the next chamber, which was awash in the glow of countless xants. Beneath the shining creatures, the glittering powder on the cave's floor sparkled like tiny diamonds.

Rafe spotted a small dead-end passageway and stepped into it. The walls inside were peppered with small holes.

"Let me help. I owe you," said Baylor, coming up behind him. She blocked the opening of the passageway with her body so nothing could leave. "There's a green xant in that indentation in the wall on your right."

Rafe lunged and seized the slippery creature in his hands. "Got you!"

The xant resisted, and Rafe booted glittery powder into the air as he pitched side to side with the xant, but he held fast until it vanished.

"Baylor, can you see it on my neck?" asked Rafe, bending his chin to his chest.

Baylor stepped into the passage, hooked his collar down with her finger and inspected Rafe's neck. "Yes! You got it!"

Rafe shuffled his feet, kicking up more glittery powder. "We should have come in here in the first place," he said, peeking into another crevice. "Hey, there's something in here." He reached into the hole and pulled out a strange wooden mallet. Its handle was wrapped in a sheet of peculiar paper.

Turning to show Baylor what he'd found, he was shocked to see her sagging against the side of the cave, breathing in shallow uneven gasps. Suddenly, her eyes rolled into the back of her head, her knees buckled, and she collapsed on the ground in front of Rafe.

Panicked, he stooped to her side, patting her face with his hand. "Bay, what's wrong?"

Then, without warning, Rafe's world went black.

Chapter Seventeen

Testing the Xant



Seamus materialized outside the xant cave, pacing and searching the sky overhead. As the sound of giant wings beating in unison filled the air, the leprechaun dropped his shillelagh and waved his hands over his head. The ground shook as Keswick and a band of gargoyles landed next to Seamus.

“What took ya so long?” asked the leprechaun. “I saw da human children and two of da fairy brats enter dis cave. I tried ta stop 'em, but dey wouldn't listen. Since yer da only creatures immune ta da effects of xant dust, ya need ta go in der and bring 'em out.”

“We go,” said Keswick, nodding his fellow gargoyles towards the cave. “The Sakal shall hear of your bravery.”

“I tank ya,” said the leprechaun with a broad smile. “Da name is Seamus O'Shanahan, if anyone is askin'.”

Within minutes, the gargoyles emerged from the cave carrying the sleeping children and fairies. They flapped their gristly bat wings and took to the sky.

With a sigh of relief, Seamus tapped his shillelagh on the ground and disappeared.

Several hours later, Rafe awoke in his bed. Stretching, he yawned and turned over onto his stomach. He'd just had the weirdest dream, but now something inside one of his trouser pockets was poking into his legs and it really hurt. Wiping his bleary eyes with one hand, he jiggled the object out of his pocket

with the other and brought it close to his face. As his eyes brought the object into focus, Rafe sat bolt upright and gasped!

He was holding a mallet with its handle wrapped in paper, so that meant he hadn't been dreaming. He'd actually been in a xant cave! Rafe's hand flew to the back of his neck where he felt something wiggling underneath his skin. He'd done it! He'd really caught a xant! The angels couldn't keep him from going outside now. He could tick off step number one in his mission to find a way home.

Pulling the paper off the handle, Rafe examined the mallet. The head of the mallet was oval-shaped and composed of a thick grey string wound around it like a small ball of yarn. The shaft of the mallet was thin, smooth wood and resembled a musical drumstick. Running his fingers over the creased paper, Rafe noticed something drawn upon it and smoothed it out over one knee. Twelve curious one-inch square grids covered the paper and there were solid black circles situated in ten of the twelve squares.

Just then, someone knocked at his door. "Are you awake?" called Thomas.

Rafe threw the paper and the mallet into the puzzle box next to his bed and ran to sit on the sofa in the other room. "Come in," he said, crossing his knees and trying to look casual.

To Rafe's surprise, Madri Isabo walked through the door first, followed by Thomas. "Madri Keva had a hunch that you might be the first one awake," said the madri, studying Rafe's face. "It is extremely lucky that a leprechaun saw you children entering the caves and went for help. Prolonged exposure to large quantities of xant dust can lead to an untimely death."

Rafe remembered seeing Baylor lying on the floor of the cave. "Is everyone okay?"

"The others are still sleeping," replied Thomas, "but Madri Ezekiel, our healer, says they should wake with no ill effects."

"Since you're conscious, please come to the ballroom with us," said Madri Isabo, exiting the room.

Thomas held the door and motioned for Rafe to step through it. Rafe frowned and followed Madri Isabo down the spiral staircase and into the ballroom. When he stepped inside the room, he was shocked to see the Sakal convened in a corner, speaking in hushed tones. Three of the male angels wore Adomis uniforms, and the rest were clad in gowns and robes from the previous evening.

"You surmised correctly, Keva. We found this child awake and alert," said Madri Isabo.

"I knew you'd be the first one awake," said Madri Keva, walking to Rafe's side and inspecting the back of his neck. "It is just as the jarvartan said. The children have all acquired xants."

"Yes, and there will be consequences for such blatant disregard of the guidelines given to them regarding their safety," said Madri Typhicus.

Rafe hung his head.

"I'll address that issue later," said Madri Typhicus. "Right now, I'd like to see how the xant is affecting you. I'm sure you won't mind helping us, will you, Mr. Ryder?"

Lifting his head, Rafe looked at the members of the Sakal. Even if he *did* mind, he had a feeling it wouldn't matter. It didn't look like they were going to take no for an answer. Rafe nodded.

"Very well," said the fairy madri, stepping forward in her sparkling yellow gown. "What activities or things could you do well before you came to Mystfira?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," said Rafe, meeting the fairy's green eyes.

"I believe that the child has keen musical ability and outstanding swordsmanship skills," replied Madri Keva.

Rafe stared at the flaxen-haired angel dressed in the elegant turquoise gown. He'd only met the woman in class that morning, and they hadn't discussed anything personal. How did she know that? It seemed that the dominion angels were responsible for more than recording history; apparently, they were also responsible for minding everybody else's business.

"I wouldn't go that far, but I can play the piano pretty well, and I'm a decent fencer."

"Perfect," said Madri Typhicus, sweeping his hand towards the grand piano in a corner of the ballroom.

Rafe walked to the instrument and seated himself on the piano bench. "What do you want me to play?"

"We would like you to play a difficult piece that you have only just started to learn," replied Madri Roanin, hurrying over to the piano bench. "May I sit with you?"

Madri Roanin was wearing an Adomis uniform now, but Rafe remembered that he had been the angel dressed in a red robe the previous night and that he was a seraph . . . one of the joyous musicians, singers, dancers, and artists of Mystfira.

"I just started learning Beethoven's 'Rondo e capriccio Opus 129' and I'm terrible at it," said Rafe, making room on the bench for Madri Roanin. "I don't have it memorized, either. I'll need the music."

"Excellent. I love 'Rage Over a Lost Penny,'" said Madri Roanin, referring to the piece by its more popular name. "Madri Fey, could you get us that music?"

Madri Roanin seated himself next to Rafe while Madri Fey summoned the music with her fairy magic and placed it on the piano shelf in front of them.

Rafe heaved a sigh. "I warn you again. I play it wretchedly and not up to tempo."

"When you're ready, please begin," said Madri Roanin.

Rafe placed his hands on the keys and began to play. To his amazement, his fingers flew over the keys as if he were a concert pianist like his father. Not only did he play the song up to tempo, he played every note perfectly and with flawless intonation.

"The xant obviously enhances their natural talents, just as it does with my little fairies," said Madri Fey, her wings vibrating as Rafe stared at the piano in astonishment.

Madri Isabo stepped forward, long thick braid swinging. She was carrying a sword in each hand and handed one to Rafe. "Let's put that theory to the test one more time?"

Rafe rose from the piano bench and followed Madri Isabo to the middle of the ballroom. "I'm not really dressed for fencing."

"It doesn't matter," said Madri Isabo, turning, lifting her sword, and bringing it down towards Rafe's head.

He instinctually blocked the madri's heavy blow. He had no idea what had gotten into the angel, but she was not playing by any fencing rules that he had ever been taught.

He jumped over the sword she swung at his legs. "You're not fighting fair!"

"I'm not?" she said, feigning surprise.

Madri Isabo continued to strike at Rafe with her sword while he thwarted her attacks. He even barrel-rolled along the ballroom floor several times to avoid one of her nastier assaults.

It was soon obvious to Rafe that Isabo had no intention of stopping the swordplay. He was simply going to have to get the sword out of the madri's hand to end it. Seizing an opportune moment, when one of Madri Isabo's volleys had left her unbalanced, he delivered a powerful blow low on her sword, which

put the madri on one knee and caused the sword to fly out of her hand. It slid across the floor, coming to rest under the piano.

Breathing heavily, Rafe watched warily as the madri rose from her knee.

"Well done," said Madri Isabo, a smile playing on her lips. "I guess we'll have to put you in a more advanced swordsmanship class."

"Just so you know," said Rafe with a frown, "that was not the way I was taught to fence."

"I wasn't fencing," replied Madri Isabo. "We don't fence in Mystfira."

"I noticed."

"Typhicus," said the archangel Michael, who had been watching from a corner of the room. "We still need to determine if the child can survive in Mystfira's environment."

Madri Typhicus nodded and beckoned forward the most distinguished-looking angel from the group. "Madri Ezekiel has brought what we need for the additional testing."

Purple robe trailing, Madri Ezekiel carried a tray with four large bowls and a tightly covered vial to the piano bench.

Taking his time, Rafe shuffled over to it. Sitting by each vessel was a large feather. Looking into the bowls, he could see a waxy substance in the first one, a milky mixture in the next, an orange-red substance in the third bowl, and a fire burning in the last bowl.

Rafe furrowed his brow. "Whatever that stuff is . . . I'm not drinking it . . . and that's final." ^

"The receptacles before you contain the various rains which fall here in Mystfira. There is also a vial of poisonous vapor which sometimes accompanies our rains," said Typhicus.

"Fantastic," said Rafe. "What's this got to do with me?"

"We need to test the rain on your hand to see if the xant has caused your body to develop some immunity to these elements. I'll demonstrate," said Madri Typhicus, dipping his own hand into the first bowl.

The wax rain rolled off the madri's hand like it was regular water. Typhicus wiped his hand with a cloth which Madri Ezekiel handed to him, and continued the demonstration. "These feathers are from your Earth," he said, dipping the first plume into the bowl of rain. The feather turned to solid wax and Madri Typhicus set it to one side on the piano bench.

The madri then proceeded to dip his hand into the second bowl, and it rolled off his skin like water off a duck, but when he dunked the feather into the mixture, it turned to rock-hard salt.

Next, the madri dipped his hand into the third bowl of rain and, again, it rolled off his skin. When the feather was submerged into the bowl, however, it turned to solid iron.

Rafe rubbed the back of his neck as Madri Typhicus repeated his strange exercise with the last bowl containing the fire rain. The madri's hand remained unscathed, but the feather was immediately incinerated.

Madri Fey's wings pulsed. "Now it's your turn, Rafe Ryder."

Rafe swallowed hard and looked at the members of the Sakal. "You want me to stick my hand into those bowls?"

"A finger will do," replied Madri Typhicus.

Rafe held up his hands and wiggled his digits. "Are you sure about this? I'd prefer to keep these."

"I recommend starting with the iron rain," said Madri Typhicus. "You can still function quite well with an iron finger."

Rafe gasped and his eyes widened.

“Don’t worry. Madri Ezekiel and I can restore a damaged finger,” said Madri Fey.

Rafe took a deep breath and raised a shaky finger. Closing his eyes, he plunged the tip of his finger into the bowl of iron, rain. To his relief, the liquid rolled off his finger, as did the salt, wax, and fire rains.

Madri Fey smiled. “He’ll be able to survive the rains.”

“I can go outside now?” said Rafe, starting to feel giddy.

“Not so fast,” said Typhicus, uncorking the vial from the tray and holding it underneath Rafe’s nose.

A violet vapor seeped from the mouth of the bottle causing Rafe to gag, cough, and sputter. The fumes from the vapor smelled dreadful. They made his nose itch and his eyes water, but after a few moments, Rafe grew accustomed to it and had no further reaction.

“He’s not poisoned by the vapors, either,” said Madri Fey. “It’s official. The xants *will* protect the human children just like they protect my fairies.”

“Yes,” agreed Madri Typhicus. “Having a xant will be beneficial for the children.”

“Madri Typhicus, may I have a word with you?” said Madri Keva.

“In a few moments.”

Madri Keva smoothed her turquoise gown. “But I think you should tell the boy—”

“Tell the boy what?” asked Rafe. “Don’t talk about me like I’m not here.”

“Raphael, please calm yourself,” said Madri Keva.

Rafe glared at the madri. “Rafe is not short for Raphael. I am Richard Arthur Fredrick Edward Ryder the third. My name is an acronym of my first and middle names.”

"That's right," said the madri in a soft voice. "Your mother does love her acronyms."

"Thank you for reminding me, Madri Keva," said Typhicus, interrupting Rafe's outburst. "I need to tell the young man the consequences for disregarding the instructions that we gave to him and his fellow students."

"That is not what I meant," replied Keva in a cool tone.

Madri Typhicus held up a hand in a warning gesture to Madri Keva before turning to face Rafe. "Even though it's safe for you and the other students to be outside in Mystfira, you will *not* do so for six weeks. In addition, the Ryder-Knight students will not be allowed to participate in any human or angelic holiday celebrations for the next six weeks."

"Oh no," said the fairy madri in a tiny disappointed voice. "They'll miss their Thanksgiving celebrations, and our Harvest festival and dance."

"So they shall," said Typhicus. "Lastly, each student will write a fifty page report on one of the twelve rings of Mystfira."

Rafe scowled as his eyes bored into Madri Typhicus. "So, basically, we're grounded for six weeks? It'll be mid-December before this punishment is over. I don't understand why the punishment has to be so harsh. We—"

Thomas interrupted Rafe's rant and bowed his head. "We thank you," he said, placing a hand on Rafe's shoulder and steering him out of the ballroom.

By the time Thomas maneuvered Rafe to the bottom of the spiral staircase, Rafe had escalated to a full-blown rage. "I can't believe it! We just wanted to find a way home," sputtered Rafe. "I can't believe they don't understand that. Nothing bad happened to us, so why is Typhicus being such a git?"

"Control your temper, young one, and trust me when I

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tell you that your punishment could have been far worse," said Thomas.

"I find that hard to believe," said Rafe, stomping up the steps to his room.



Chapter Eighteen

Lockdown in the Palace

When the rest of the Ryder-Knight students woke, Rafe gathered them in his room to explain what had happened in the ballroom. He'd had a hunch the others would be as infuriated as he had been to learn the punishment for their behavior, and he was right. Parker conveyed the group's sentiments by storming out of the room and slamming the door behind her.

"We'll never get home," said Oliver, dropping his head into his hands.

"Yes, we will," said Rafe. "We just have to take our punishment and wait until the angels aren't watching us. Then we'll find a way to get back to Earth."

"I don't care if they are watching us," said Deidre, pacing the floor. "They can't stop us from looking for a way to go home."

"They can and they will," replied Rafe. "In case you don't remember, I have two words for you: xant dust."

"He's right," said Blake, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "If we don't toe the line, the angels will blow that stuff all over us and we'll be happy to be here—and if we're happy to be here, we won't be interested in looking for a way to get home."

Tired and dejected, the other students trickled out of Rafe's room and back to their own, leaving Blake, Baylor, and Rafe to compare their schedule of classes, which were to begin at the crack of dawn the following morning.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Hey, you guys. We’re all in the same advanced ballroom class together,” said Blake.

“I didn’t want to take Advanced Ballroom. Blake made me put it down,” said Baylor. “Audra’s always been his dance partner at Ryder-Knight, but I’m the one he practices with when Audra’s not around.”

“I hear you. I didn’t want to take it, either,” said Rafe. “My ability to dance is not something I broadcast to the world.”

And that was the absolute truth. Even though his mother owned a dance studio, Rafe’s ability to ballroom dance was a secret that he kept guarded from all his friends. The twins only knew because his mother had given them dance lessons, too.

According to Rafe’s parents, the idea to teach the children to dance was born out of their desire to preserve their own sanity on rainy days in Maine. Needing to find some activity for the fidgety, housebound children, Rafe’s mother gave them ballroom dance lessons. At first, the mischievous children bungled around the room but, after several summers, they learned how to gracefully whirl around the ballroom floor.

“Stop complaining, you two,” Blake said. “Learning to dance was the best thing I ever did to improve my athleticism.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know,” said Rafe, hearing his mother’s voice in his head and mimicking. “Cross-training in dance increases your strength, balance, flexibility, and endurance.”

Although Rafe would never admit it to his mother, she was right. Dancing had definitely enhanced his abilities on the fencing piste, and he was rarely, if ever, defeated.

Baylor opened her mouth to speak, but Blake cut her off. “I don’t want to hear another word, Bay. Put on your big girl panties and deal. You and Rafe have partnered with each other before. You know what to expect.”

The next afternoon, Blake, Audra, Rafe, and Baylor entered one of the grand ballrooms in the Palace of Angels to find Sullivan Cabot, Mikiko Kaouri, Neil Trask, and Parker Sutton waiting for dance lessons, too.

Huddled in a corner of the ballroom surrounded by mops, rags, and buckets, sat Poppe and Potts polishing the floor with all their might.

“Hi,” Poppe said.

“What are you two doing here?” asked Rafe.

Potts gave the children a pouty look. “We have to polish this ballroom floor every day for the next six weeks as part of our punishment for showing you where to get xants.”

Blake looked around at the sparse turnout for the ballroom class. “Is this it? Does everyone have a partner?”

“Angelic students can dance on air, so this class must just be for humans,” said Potts.

Parker smiled one of her take-your-breath-away smiles and walked to Rafe’s side. “I didn’t realize you were taking this class. I don’t have a partner yet. Would you like to dance with me?”

Mesmerized by Parker’s smile, Rafe answered without hesitation, “Yes—I mean, sure . . . if it would help you out.”

As Parker took his hand and pulled Rafe out to the dance floor, he glanced at Baylor. He felt a twinge of guilt when he saw the crestfallen expression on her face.

Madri Avalon swept into the center of the ballroom, soft blonde ringlets accentuating her beautiful round face. The train of her rose-colored gown had been bustled so that she could demonstrate dance steps without tripping over it.

“Madri Roanin has graciously agreed to help me teach this class when his Adomis practice is finished. I don’t know when he

will arrive, but we'll start with a waltz to warm up. Please select a partner and get into dance position," she said.

Poppe and Potts picked up their buckets, mops, and rags and tried to scurry out the door.

"Not so fast, you two," said Madri Avalon. "You need to stay here until Madri Fey comes to retrieve you."

Blake and Audra joined Rafe and Parker in the center of the ballroom while Sully offered his hand to Mikiko and they walked onto the floor.

"Oh no, no, no," said Neil Trask, folding his arms over his chest and shaking his spiky brown hair at Baylor.

"What's your problem, Trask?" asked Blake.

Neil unfolded his arms and pointed a long finger at Baylor. "I'm not dancing with . . . *her*," he said in a contemptuous tone.

Baylor couldn't have looked more shocked if Neil had slapped her across the face. Her dark eyes welled with tears and she bit her lip as her chin fell to her chest.

"Baylor's a good dancer," said Blake.

Neil sneered. "Then *you* dance with her," he said.

"Audra has been my dance partner for the last two years, and Mikiko and Sully have been partners for just as long," replied Blake. "You need to grow up."

"Neil Trask, you better not even suggest that I be your partner," said Parker, clinging to Rafe's arm. "I would never dance with such a rude, insensitive person."

"I'd rather dance with a mop than dance with the Sorceress. We wouldn't be here if it weren't for that witch," said Neil.

Baylor's face turned pale, and her chin quivered. She looked like she hoped the floor would open and swallow her whole.

"I'll dance with her," said a deep voice from the doorway behind them.

Every eye turned to the entrance of the ballroom. A ruggedly handsome, broad-shouldered young man strode into the room. He had a chiseled jaw and warm dark eyes that exuded kindness. His clothes were similar to those worn by Adomis players, but his shirt was white.

The dark-haired young man stepped to Baylor's side and extended his hand. "My lady, would you do me the honor?"

Madri Avalon looked confused. "Sion? I don't understand. What are you doing here?"

"I'm demonstrating how to be a gentleman," replied Sion.

Baylor took his hand as Madri Roanin stormed through the doors of the ballroom.

"I just heard what went on in here from the hallway. If you boys wish to act like vulgar cads outside this ballroom, that's your prerogative, but the moment you step through these doors, I expect to see conduct befitting a gentleman. That means, I expect you to treat *all* the young ladies in this room with respect and kindness."

Unfazed by Madri Roanin's reprimand, Neil hooked his thumbs through his belt loops and smiled. "I guess there's no one left for me to dance with except you, Madri Avalon."

"I think not," replied Madri Roanin. "Madri Avalon is *my* partner, and I would never allow her to dance with someone demonstrating such boorish behavior, but you'll be happy to know the fairies have arranged an appropriate dance partner for you."

Neil turned to look behind him. Poppe and Potts had enchanted one of their mops, which had grown spindly arms and legs and approached Neil. "Wait," he protested as the mop grabbed him and twirled him around the ballroom floor. "*I'm* supposed to lead."

The next two-and-a-half weeks passed slowly for the

Ryder-Knight Academy children while they attended their assigned angelic classes and tried to bear up under their punishment.

To make matters worse for Rafe, Madri Keva decided that in addition to writing a fifty-page report, the Ryder-Knight students would have to deliver an *oral* report. Rafe hated public speaking with a passion. He'd rather wrestle a hive of angry bees than stand up in front of the class and give a report. At least he'd been assigned a report on the Ring of Rocks, and he'd been there once. The other students hadn't been quite so lucky.

Rafe prepared for his oral report by sneaking to the top of the tower room each morning before class and secretly rehearsing it out loud. When the morning of his report dawned, he knew it backwards and forwards, but he decided to practice it one last time.

Cracking open his door, Rafe tiptoed out of his room and almost stepped on a cupcake in the hallway outside his door. He'd been so preoccupied with his oral report, he'd forgotten today was his thirteenth birthday, but someone had remembered.

Rafe tucked his report under his arm and retrieved the cupcake. There was a small homemade card underneath it, which read:

Happy Birthday, Rafe Ryder!

I know Mystfira is the last place in the universe anyone wants to be on their thirteenth birthday, and I know a chocolate cupcake doesn't begin to make up for being trapped here. This is all my fault. You'll never know how sorry I am for what happened. I would give anything if you would stop hating me and we could be friends again.

Sincerely yours, Baylor

Licking the frosting from the cupcake, Rafe climbed to the top of the tower room and stepped out onto the stone balcony. He knew he'd find Baylor sitting on the ground beneath the carved tree stump. She was there every morning throwing a ball for Leopold to retrieve, while Simon flew lazy circles in the sky above them.

Adjusting to life in Mystfira had been challenging for everyone, but especially for Baylor. The other students were still angry with her, so she was either snubbed or ignored altogether. The angelic students took their cue from the human children and steered clear of her as well. Baylor spent much of her time alone in her room playing the violin, or outside by the stump, gazing into the faces whittled into it.

There was no doubt in Rafe's mind that Baylor was feeling lonely and homesick. Although he did *blame* her for their being in Mystfira, he didn't *hate* her, but he knew exactly why she thought he did. He hadn't purposely set out to hurt Baylor. It had just happened, and, after that, it just seemed easier to avoid her.

Now, standing in the tower and looking down at Baylor, Rafe had to admit he owed the girl an apology. He should have told Parker that he already had a partner, and Neil's little outburst could have been avoided. It was time to go make peace with the girl who had been thoughtful enough to remember his birthday and make him a cupcake.

As Baylor rose from beneath the stump and walked towards Cliff House, Rafe descended the steps of the tower room. He knew she was on her way to the cafeteria. She always went to breakfast early so that she could steer clear of the other Ryder-Knight students. He'd grab his geography book and head over to meet her.

He hoped he didn't chicken out of apologizing, but, if he

did, there was always small talk. If things got really awkward, he could start a conversation about their classes. Aside from the fact most of their classes occurred in boring rooms of plain castle stone—so the angelic students wouldn't become distracted from their studies—some of the classes themselves were pretty interesting.

The fairy, Madri Fey, taught their Sacred Geometry class. She was quite an amusing character with a knack for easily explaining complicated concepts to the students, such as why it was crucial that certain palaces in Mystfira be joined together in times of trouble.

"Certain shapes, spaces, and materials resonate or vibrate at a higher rate than others and maximize certain possibilities. Think of it in this way," she had said when the students looked at her blankly. "Musical instruments must be fashioned out of the proper materials and formed into certain shapes before they are capable of producing their own distinct musical sounds. Merging the palaces into a unique geometrical configuration produces a vibration, an unheard sound, that maximizes the angels' ability to defend and protect Mystfira and its inhabitants."

No one misbehaved in Madri Fey's class, either. The other teachers gave detention, but disrupting geometry class had magical consequences. The madri's favorite punishment was a zipper to the lips of a cheeky student, but she had been known to gag and tie students to their chairs for particularly egregious offenses.

Rafe's Musical Composition class with Madri Avalon had been less than thrilling so far. Instead of examining the wonderful world of musical notes and how to put them all together, the angelic students were consumed with the delightful world of human emotions, which, in Rafe's opinion, was ridiculous. To him, much of the time, human emotions felt like riding the highest,

most frightening roller coaster, but the seraphim and the cherubim students were totally convinced that it was not possible to produce an artistic work of any worth unless they were first able to *feel*. They were interested in experiencing human love and joy, but equally excited about undergoing sadness and pain.

The Angelology class with Madri Estel was tolerable. They were studying each group of angels in depth. The angelic students knew a lot about the group of angels to which they belonged, but next to nothing about the other groups of angels.

Madri Ezekiel's class, the Flora and Fauna of Mystfira, was amazing. Mystfira was full of strange plants and creatures, and the madri brought something new to see every day.

A week ago, the madri had brought a gadaboot into the classroom. The lush green plant—which produced a lovely, fragrant red blossom—was appropriately named: It had two long roots shaped like miniature boots, and it never stayed in one place for long. The plant constantly pulled itself up from the pot in which Madri Ezekiel had planted it and aimlessly roamed the room, leaving dirty little boot prints everywhere.

Yesterday, it shimmied up a table leg to sit on Baylor's lap for a few minutes before creeping to the top of Oliver's head. In order to get the plant to stay put, Madri Ezekiel placed it into a large pot of water on the windowsill, where it floated contentedly for the remainder of the class.

So far, the best creature Madri Ezekiel had ever brought into class was a huebalop from the eighth ring of The Desert. Hairless and covered with thick rough skin, which could change color to blend into its surroundings, the huebalop had an extremely long tube-shaped mouth, powerful hind legs, and large feet similar to a kangaroo's. Huebalops were docile creatures that loved nothing more than sipping fresh molten lava. Well . . . that is unless you

disturbed them while they were drinking lava. A huebalop had knocked Madri Ezekiel nearly senseless with its long back legs when the madri took its bowl of lava away.

Rafe didn't mind his piano lessons, either, especially since playing came so easily to him now. Madri Roanin was a great piano teacher and, sometimes, Rafe almost felt like his father was sitting on the piano bench next to him.

If Rafe had to choose a favorite class, though, it would have to be Swordsmanship, taught by Madri Saniel, Madri Uriah, and Madri Isabo. He had been placed in the most advanced class with the older students. He had to admit, his ability to handle a sword since catching his xant was truly remarkable, and the madrikim teaching the class had taken a special interest in helping him improve his skills.

When Rafe reached the cafeteria, he put his musings behind him and opened the door. The room was nearly empty, so he had no problem spotting Baylor at a nearby table.

"Thanks for remembering my birthday," he said, sliding into the seat next to her.

Baylor's face brightened and she smiled. "You're welcome. It seemed like the least I could do under the circumstances."

Rafe cleared his throat. "I'm really sorry that things have been so awkward between us lately, but you have to know that I don't hate you, right, Bay? I could never hate you."

"That's a relief, but you really could have fooled me."

"I know," said Rafe, throwing his hands in the air. "I've been a lousy friend, and I'm sorry. I really am."

Baylor nodded her head emphatically. "Yes, you have."

"Ouch," replied Rafe, making a face. "Okay, I deserved that. I promise, I'll be a better friend from now on."

"Honestly, beggars can't be choosers," said Baylor, dropping

her gaze and staring at her plate. "I'll take any friend I can get, even a lousy one."

Rafe opened the book in front of him. "Let me make it up to you," he said, handing her a sheet of paper he pulled from the pages. "I made this for you the first night we got to Mystfira. It's a rhyming memory technique to help you keep track of all the angels around here. Sorry it has taken me so long to give it to you."

Baylor lips curled into a smile as she read over the sheet.

"Your mother would be proud. This will definitely come in handy," she said. "I still can't remember the angels we don't see that often. Thank you."

Rafe and Baylor locked eyes for a few intense moments before he couldn't bear it any longer. Why did her eyes always seem to see to the very bottom of his soul? "You're welcome," he mumbled.

"Listen," said Baylor, rising from the table. "I hope you don't think I'm terrible, but I have to go feed Leopold and finish my homework. I really wasn't expecting anyone to stop and chat with me this morning."

"Go," said Rafe, waving her away. "I'm going to get something to eat so I don't fall down during my oral report."

"Good luck with that. I'll see you in class, and happy birthday!" called Baylor over her shoulder as she hurried away from the table.

An hour later, Rafe faced the students in his geology class to give his report. It went remarkably well . . . until the other students were allowed to ask him questions.

"You failed to mention that big tree we saw while we were in the Ring of Rocks," said Deidre.

"Sorry," said Rafe, shooting daggers at her with his eyes. "Most of the material on the Tree of All Knowledge was in the

restricted section of the library, but I did find one book that mentioned it.”

He flipped through the papers in his hand until he came to the right page.

“The tree sat next to The Well of Wisdom and was fiercely guarded for eons by all the inhabitants of the Ring of Rocks. It was said that the tree would put forth a piece of fruit if water from the Well of Wisdom was placed into a sacred silver chalice and poured over its roots.

“Many times, the dark spirits of Baeldavar invaded Mystfira in hopes of finding the chalice and forcing the tree to produce fruit. They believed eating the fruit would give them the knowledge necessary to rule the heavens. The battles became so numerous and so dangerous that the seventh heaven of Araboth decided that the Tree of All Knowledge should be demolished.

“The fairies living in the heavens were charged with this task, but they argued against the tree’s destruction, stating that, one day, darkness would be banished forever and the tree could, once again, resume its rightful place in the Ring of Rocks. The fairies received permission to magically transform the tree into a staff, called Aaron’s Rod. They divided the staff into seven pieces and hid them throughout the universe for safekeeping. The fairies also sealed the Well of Wisdom and hid the sacred silver chalice for good measure.”

“Then what’s the tree doing in the Ring of Rocks?” asked Deidre.

“From what I understand, all the pieces of Aaron’s Rod were located and pieced back together. Then the staff was driven into

the ground next to the Well of Wisdom, bringing the tree back to life,” said Rafe. “No one knows who is responsible for doing it. Oh, and I did find out one more interesting fact. The Tree of All Knowledge has a hedge of protection around it comprised entirely of Hell’s Tongue. Hell’s Tongue is a small plant, but it has extremely long blossoms of shooting flames. That concludes my report . . . unless there are any more questions.”

“Well done, Mr. Ryder,” said Madri Keva.

The angelic student named Shar twirled her stringy blonde hair. “I have one more question. Why can’t the fairies change the tree back into a rod and hide it again?”

“I don’t know,” said Rafe. “I shared all the information that I could find.”

“Madri?” said Shar, turning to the teacher.

“I suppose that the fairies could do that again, but only if the seventh heaven gives them permission to do so,” replied the madri.

“Will the dark spirits invade Mystfira and start a war again?” asked the dark-haired angel named Malachi.

Madri Keva smiled reassuringly. “It is highly doubtful that the dark spirits of Baeldavar would try to start another war,” she said calmly. “And besides that, the Well of Wisdom was sealed and cannot be opened unless one first locates the Fairy Grimoire and the Hammer of Justice. Those items are needed to break the seal, and they are well and truly hidden.”

“Everyone believed the pieces of Aaron’s Rod were too well hidden to be found, yet *someone* did,” said Diadem, the fair-haired boy, famous for belching on the first day of classes.

“What if the well is opened and a dark spirit finds the cup and pours the water over the roots of the tree?” Shar said in alarm.

“Please don’t worry,” said Madri Keva. “There are more safeguards in place than one could imagine. For instance, the fairies

replicated the silver chalice thousands of times and have hidden it throughout Mystfira. The chances of finding the original cup, and recognizing it as such, are minimal.”

The trumpet sounded, signifying the end of class, and the students rose to go to their next class. Rafe handed his written report to Madri Keva on his way out the door and found the twins waiting for him in the hallway.

“I don’t know what you were worried about,” said Baylor. “You did great.”

“You really did,” said Blake. “I had a question for you, but it seemed inappropriate to ask in class.”

“What do you want to know?”

“If you could eat the fruit from the Tree of All Knowledge, what would you most like to know?”

“That’s easy,” Rafe replied. “I’d like to know how to cure my father’s disease.”

“That would be a great thing to know,” said Blake, nodding his head. “I guess I’d like to know what made my parents disappear, and if they’re ever coming back. What about you, Bay?”

“I’d just like to know how to get us all home,” she said.

Rand sailed up behind Rafe and clapped him on the back. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop on your conversation, and I don’t mean to be rude, but you’re all forgetting one thing. It’s called the Tree of *All* Knowledge. “You wouldn’t have to choose what you’d know. You’d know everything.”

“He makes a good point,” said Blake, watching Rand disappear into the crowd of students swarming in the hallway. “Eating the fruit from that tree would solve all our problems.”



Chapter Nineteen

Truvian Village

Six weeks of confinement to the grounds of Cliff House and the Palace of Angels had left Rafe feeling trapped and frustrated, but things were about to change in a big way. In a few minutes, Thomas would be taking the Ryder-Knight students into the jarvartan village of Truvian for the first time.

Gold bits were the official currency of Truvian, but Thomas had told them the shops in the village were also happy to trade other things for their goods and services. He suggested that the students look around their rooms for little things to exchange with the shop owners.

Rafe put an old yo-yo and an unopened bar of soap in his coat pocket when he suddenly remembered the mallet made of string in his mother's puzzle box. He had no use for that thing, but maybe someone in the village would like it. He retrieved the mallet and stuck it into his other pocket.

Sliding on his winter coat, Rafe felt almost blissful, and not because someone had blown xant dust on him, either. At last he and the other Ryder-Knight students could start looking for a way to get home. However, not today. Today, he'd simply be content to explore Truvian and, thanks to Deidre, buy a present for Parker.

Last night, Deidre had announced that she was organizing a holiday party for the Ryder-Knight students since she felt that it was highly unlikely they'd be home in time for the winter

holidays. She'd also made everyone draw names out of a hat for a gift exchange. If they weren't comfortable buying a gift for the first name they drew, or if they got their own name, they could throw it back in the hat and try again. Rafe was thrilled to have drawn Parker's name on his first try.

"Are you ready?" asked Blake, jabbing his head into Rafe's room. "Good, you're wearing a coat. Baylor said that it's really cold outside."

"Yep," said Rafe. He shut his bedroom door and followed Blake down to the grand foyer.

"Look, Thomas is here and it's snowing!" shouted Oliver as he opened the front door and waved to the jarvartan. "It looks like real honest-to-goodness snow, too."

Rafe could see big thick flakes gently wafting to the ground.

"Thomas!" called Blake. "Is that the kind of snow we have in Maine?"

Thomas caught some snowflakes in the palm of his hand and smiled. "It is the type of snow with which you are familiar."

The students whooped in delight and darted out the front door into the main courtyard of the palace. Awestruck, Rafe gaped at the splendid winter decorations as Thomas led them along a path towards the drawbridge.

The angels and fairies had turned the palace gardens into a winter wonderland. Trees encased in ice, dripping with enchanting icicle ornaments, had been fashioned into archways over the paths. Holly berries, evergreen boughs, and poinsettias in every color imaginable filled the dormant fountains, transforming them into fragrant flowerpots.

Frosty wreaths and colorful twinkling lights, suspended by nothing at all, floated gracefully through the air above them. Some of the statues had been replaced with glowing ice

sculptures, which periodically changed colors deep within their frosty depths.

"Mind your step crossing the drawbridge. The last thing we need is for one of you to fall into the mixer moat," Thomas cautioned.

Rafe peered into the deep broad ditch filled with black water that churned and twisted menacingly. Mixer moat was an apropos title. Falling off the drawbridge would definitely not be a pleasant experience.

"I don't know why the palace has a moat like this, but it is totally cool," said Oliver.

"Dark spirits dislike water, and they do not swim," said Thomas. "It is just one of the many ways the palace is guarded.

Rafe looked skyward and counted thirteen grotesque figures hovering above them.

"What are they doing here?" asked Deidre.

"They are providing security for this excursion," replied Thomas. "You may go anywhere you wish to in the village; however, each of you has been assigned to the care of one gargoyle. They will guard you from a distance, so you will not find them too obtrusive."

It had stopped snowing, but the wind was beginning to stir. It ruffled the children's clothing as they crossed the bridge. Suddenly, Rafe felt his coat collar being pulled and a shower of small pebbles thumped him and the other children on their heads.

"Ow," said Rafe, rubbing his head.

"Hello—lo—lo. I brought gold—old—old."

Rafe looked down to see tiny nuggets of gold scattered at the feet of the Ryder-Knight students. The children stooped and eagerly gathered the bits of gold.

Baylor blew a kiss into the wind. "Thank you very much."

The Parrot Wind lifted the end of the blue-and-gold fringed scarf loosely wound around Baylor's neck and tickled her face with it. Then it whooshed around the children. "You are welcome—come—come. Liar—ar—ar. Real—al—al. Danger—ger—ger."

"You're not starting that again, are you?" said Gerand.

Thomas patted the air like he was petting a large dog. "Thank you for bringing the students some gold to use in the village, but let them walk around in peace, please."

"Please—ease—ease," hissed the wind as it vanished.

Two large stone arches bordering the drawbridge welcomed the children to the village of Truvian. Most of the structures in Truvian were made out of rough grey stones and shingles. A notable exception was the vast ivory structure that towered over the village. The crescent-shaped building was tucked into the curve of the wide third ring as seamlessly as the Palace of Angels.

Thomas gathered the children around him. "Let me point out a few things and then you may explore the village to your heart's content. The signs here are written in the angelic language of Anfar, but Typhicus requested the people of Truvian to provide additional signs in English so that you would be able to understand them."

"How big of him," said Deidre, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Thomas pointed to the street paved with smooth, speckled red bricks and polished to a high gloss. "Here in Truvian, we are especially proud of our red jasper streets."

"They are beautiful and so clean," said Audra.

Ebon ran his hand along the wall of a stone building. "What are these materials? I've never seen anything quite like them before."

“Our houses and businesses are constructed with sparnot stone and ossignio wood. Sparnot is a stone harder than a diamond, and ossignio wood cannot be harmed by fire. You may, however, recognize the glass in our windows as druri-glass.”

“What’s that huge ivory building ahead of us?” asked Rafe. “Is that another palace?”

Thomas smiled. “No. It is the library.”

Rafe cocked his head to one side. “So that’s what it looks like from the outside.”

The streets bustled with folks in long old-fashioned coats and cloaks. Some of the children coming out of a bookstore, called The Scribe, were dressed in more modern clothes like the Ryder-Knight students, and Rafe recognized them as angelic students from the palace.

“The village almost feels medieval,” Parker said, gazing through a store window at a woman wearing a long frock with an overdress cinched at her waist and a man wearing a simple smock shirt with pants tucked into cuffed boots.

Ebon turned in place, carefully observing his surroundings. “I would agree—with one exception. Things were filthy in medieval times. Everything here is pristine.”

Oliver skipped ahead of the other students and peered through the window of a shop called The Coach and Footman. “I want a pair of boots. They seem to be the fashion rage around here.”

“So they are. The jarvartan feel that everyone should have a proper pair of boots,” replied Thomas. “In fact, it is customary for us to buy the angel with whom we are matched his or her first pair.”

Oliver bounced back to the group of Ryder-Knight students and gazed up at Thomas. “Can we go explore now?”

"I have a couple more things to say first, and then you may have your freedom. We are on Dressage Street. As you can see, it is a circular road that begins and ends on either side of the drawbridge of the palace. It is the main street of our village and all of the best shops and eateries are located here. The streets become more residential after you pass the library. I hardly need to warn you, but do not go near the two establishments that are frequented by dark spirits. One is a magic store called The Crooked Curse, and the other is a tavern called The Sneaky Snake."

Rafe's face crinkled with curiosity. "Why would you allow dark spirits to come into Mystfira at all?"

"We have our reasons," replied Thomas. "Baeldavar is in such close proximity to us, we sometimes find ourselves in need of things such as antidotes to poisons and remedies for curses that would otherwise be impossible to acquire. The Sneaky Snake caters to the peculiar food tastes of the dark spirits allowed to live among us. I can say, with certainty, that you children will not find their food appealing. However, there are many nice places to eat in Truvian. I would recommend The Wind and Wings Tavern, which is run by the jarvartan, a fairy establishment called The House of Dew, or The Gold Leaf, which is run by the leprechauns."

Deidre pointed towards a large stone building with oversized doors and windows. "What's that building with the gargoyles standing around it?" she asked.

"That is The Gargoyles' Perch," said Thomas. "You would be welcome to eat there, too, but their furniture is rather oversized. Gargoyles can be lively conversationalists when they are off duty, though."

Deidre rolled her eyes. "I doubt that."

"Unless you have more questions for me, please feel free to

look around Truvian. We will return to the palace grounds at six o'clock. I will wait for your group across the street at The Wind and Wings Tavern."

Hearing no further questions, Thomas crossed the red jasper street and entered the tavern. The Ryder-Knight students drifted along Dressage Street in small clusters, their gargoyles keeping a watchful eye on them from the sky.

Blake turned to his twin and clasped his hands under his chin in a begging gesture. "I need help picking out a gift."

"Actually, I could use your input, too," said Rafe.

Baylor sighed.

"I'll take that as a yes," said Blake.

"I suppose you traded until you got Audra's name," said Baylor, smiling at her brother.

Blake chuckled. "I did."

"And let me guess," said Baylor, turning to Rafe. "You have Parker's name."

"I do, but I drew it fair and square on my first draw," said Rafe.

"Do either of you know what you want to get these girls?" asked Baylor.

The boys both shrugged.

"Okay," she said, looking exasperated. "That doesn't give me much to go on. Let's look around for a while and see what's in the shops."

That suited Rafe. There was a lot to see on Dressage Street. Every shop boasted large druri-glass windows filled with lavish displays meant to make a good first impression. Of course, there were normal stores that one would expect to see in any town, such as clothing shops and bookstores, but there were also some very unusual ones.

Talking heads floated around the display window of the Nothing but Notions store, giving each other practical suggestions as they drifted by one another.

"I wonder if there are any bodies to go with those heads," said Blake, cracking open the door and peering inside. Although the children hadn't gone in, Rafe couldn't hear himself think above the racket coming from the hundreds of talking heads roving about and nattering incessantly.

"Please come in," said the fairy proprietor, fluttering to the floor and opening the door wide.

"No, thanks," replied Rafe "We're looking for gifts for our friends, and I'm not sure what we'd do with a talking head."

The fairy giggled. "My heads aren't for sale," she said. "They're my store clerks and they're experts on every subject imaginable. I sell ideas, and I'd be happy to sell you some suggestions for gifts."

"Not right now, thank you," said Baylor, "but we promise to come back later if we can't come up with anything on our own."

They moved on to the next store, called Fairy Wishes, whose display window featured colorful levitating candles moving in a counter-clockwise spiral. The store was crammed full of magical items, such as herbs, oils, stones, crystals, candles, athames, wands, and runes.

While Baylor talked her brother out of buying a magic mirror, which would tell Audra what was wrong with her appearance each morning, Rafe listened to the store's owner, Elam, talk about magic.

"Magic . . . ah, magic! We fairies do so love our magic, but we only practice arcane magic, which uses things such as spells, potions, and charms. Anyone can be trained to practice it, even you. Of course, one may or may not have a talent for it. The angels, on the other hand, practice divine magic, and they alone are

born with the ability to use that type of magic. If that's the kind of magic you're looking for, I'm afraid no one can help you."

After Baylor convinced her brother there was nothing suitable for Audra in the store, the children moved on to the next shop called The Broken Wing, which had the most beautiful displays of any store on Dressage Street. Glorious pairs of fairy wings flitted about the window, shimmering. In addition to selling new wings, the shop repaired damage to fairy appendages. Also, if a fairy's wing colors had faded or ceased glimmering altogether, the wings could be repainted. The owner of the shop confided that he was reluctant to sell new wings to fairies unless their old ones were destroyed because, after all, he'd never known a fairy endowed with ugly wings.

As Rafe tramped in and out of stores with the twins, he began to think he'd never find an appropriate gift for Parker.

"Let's try this store," said Blake, pointing to a shop called The Treasure Trove. A long royal purple drape blocked the interior of the shop from view, but there was a hand-lettered sign in capital letters reading: YOU WANT IT? I GOT IT.

Rafe followed Blake and Baylor into the dimly lit store and fell speechless. It seemed more like a pirate's den than a store.

Rafe wasn't sure which way to look until he noticed something moving in the corner of the room. There, squatting by several gleaming treasure chests, was Rand sifting through golden cups, silver beads, and precious jewelry.

Baylor sneezed three times in a row. "I smell dust and—"

"Don't you dare say that you smell trouble," said Blake.

"It's not that. I smell cigarettes."

Rafe took a deep breath. The scent hovered beneath the surface, but now that Baylor mentioned it, he could smell cigarettes, too.

“Gerand Rial, you don’t smoke, do you?” asked Baylor, using his full name like a concerned mother and walking towards the boy.

“No,” replied Rand, sniffing at his clothing, “but I went into The Sneaky Snake looking for something to eat. It’s foul and reeks of smoke in there.”

“Why did you do that?” asked Blake. “Thomas told us to stay out of there.”

“I don’t know. I was walking by and I was hungry,” said Rand. “I didn’t pay any attention to the name of the place. I went in and I came right back out. Don’t make a big deal about it. It was an honest mistake.”

“I’m sorry,” Baylor said. “I didn’t mean to start anything.”

“It’s okay. Forget it,” said Rand.

Rafe drifted away from the others to take a better look around the huge room. All four walls had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, two of which contained old books. A third wall boasted powders and potions in pretty glass jars, and the last wall featured trinkets and knickknacks. Glass display counters, strewn about the room, held jewelry, candlesticks, plates, fine linens, and crystals.

“What can I sell ya?” asked Seamus, waddling out from behind one of the tall glass counters.

“Seamus!” cried Baylor in surprise.

“Welcome ta me shop,” said the leprechaun. “What do ya want?”

“I don’t think we know yet. We’re looking for gifts to exchange at a party,” replied Baylor.

“I’ll sit on me stool and wait fer ya ta make up yer minds.”

The leprechaun crossed his arms and plunked himself onto a low stool, eyeing them.

"There are some beautiful antique jeweled combs over here," said Baylor to her brother.

"Audra's hair always looks perfect. Why would I want to buy her a comb?"

Baylor swept her long dark hair up to one side, fastening a fan-shaped comb studded with pearls into it. "It's the kind of comb you *wear* in your hair, silly, not the kind of comb you use to *comb* your hair. See how pretty it looks," she said, twirling her head around so her brother and Rafe could see. "I think Audra would love this. If you *really* want to impress her, buy a collar for her cat, too. Seamus has some really cute ones over there."

"Thanks, Baylor," said Blake. He snatched the comb from his sister's hair and planted a kiss on her cheek. "I'll grab the collar for Pebbles and I'm set. I'll go see if Seamus is willing to make a trade or if I'll have to part with some gold."

Rafe turned to Baylor. "I thought you said Ryder-Knight students couldn't have pets. How come Audra has a cat?"

"Audra wished for her room at home, not her dorm room at Ryder-Knight, so Pebbles came with it," replied Baylor. "But never mind that. Do you see anything in here you'd like to get for Parker?"

"I have no idea. You're a girl. What would *you* like to have?"

"If I were Parker, I would love to have one of those antique music boxes on the counter over there, or maybe one of the pretty scarves that were flying around the display window at The Three Sisters shop across the road."

"A music box," Rafe said. "That's actually a great idea. Which one do you think I should get her?"

"Do you see the glass box with the four couples on the ball-room floor? You are Parker's dance partner, aren't you? I'd say that would make the perfect gift."

Rafe's face reddened as guilt tugged at him. He crossed the room to examine the box so that Baylor wouldn't see his discomfort. Lifting the lid, he watched as the dressed couples spun around the dance floor. It really was perfect.

Seamus waddled over to Rafe. "Er ya interested in buyin' dat box?"

"I am."

"Excellent. I can start trainin' me new assistant den," said Seamus, pointing at Rand.

"I didn't have anything to trade with the leprechaun except my services," Rand said. "I have to work here for an hour every day after classes."

"Eyes down 'ere, mister," said Seamus to Rafe. "I'm makin' dis deal. Ya got gold, or er ya wishin' ta make a trade?"

"I'd like to make a trade," said Rafe, digging into his pockets and placing the soap, yo-yo, and mallet onto the counter in front of him.

The leprechaun lifted the mallet from the counter. "What's dis?"

"Isn't it obvious?" asked Rafe. "It's a drum mallet with its handle wrapped in . . . um . . . interesting paper."

"I'll take it, but keep yer paper. I got enough of dat around 'ere." Seamus handed the wrapping paper back to Rafe and tapped the yo-yo. "What does dis do?"

"It's a toy." Rafe pulled the yo-yo over his finger. He performed a few simple tricks before laying the yo-yo back on the table.

"I'll take da toy, da drum stick, and da soap," said the leprechaun. "Shake on it."

"Deal," said Rafe as he and Seamus shook hands.

Seamus handed the glass music box to Rand and pointed

him towards a counter with brown wrapping paper and string. "Take dis music box and wrap it up."

"I'd like my things wrapped also," called Blake as he looked through a pile of pocket watches in the corner of the store. Rand glowered at him in disdain.

"Make sure ta watch da customers while yer wrappin' tings," said Seamus, pointing at Blake. "I don't want people slippin' anyting inta der pockets." The leprechaun turned to face Baylor. "Don't ya need to be buying a gift, as well?"

"Me?" asked Baylor, looking startled.

Rafe nodded. "Yes, she does."

"Oh, right," said Baylor. "I guess I do." She picked up a sling-shot lying in front of her. "What are you asking for this?"

"Dat would cost ya a pretty penny down da street at Da Full Quiver and Clanking Sword, but da only ting it will cost ya 'ere is one of yer pretty smiles."

Baylor beamed. "Thank you, Seamus."

"I've been told I've got a pretty smile, too!" shouted Blake from across the room.

"Forget it," said the leprechaun. "Yer lucky I didn't charge ya double fer dat mug of yers."

The door to The Treasure Trove opened and Oliver burst in with a squeal, waving an ice cream cone. "I've been looking for you guys everywhere. Did you know that there is a place in the Fairy Forest that grows candy and sweets of every kind? The fairies sell them in a shop called Sweet Dreams right down the street. I got ice cream. Madri Fey changes the snow that falls in the Fairy Forest to ice cream, and it doesn't melt anywhere except in your mouth. You don't miss a single drop of it. See?"

"Er der fairies out der? Da last ting I want in 'ere is a sugared-up fairy," said Seamus, pulling back the purple drape and taking

a look outside. "Dat's it. Out ya go, except fer me new assistant. I'll need em fer a few more minutes."

Seamus pushed the children out of his shop and shut the door.

"So what did you get, Baylor? I couldn't see from across the room," asked Blake as soon as they hit the sidewalk.

"I'm not telling you. Stop being so nosy," she chastised.

"That mean she's probably got your name," said Oliver, licking his ice cream cone and smacking his lips.

At that moment, Rafe's stomach gurgled. "I'm starving."

"Me, too," said Baylor. "I was too excited to eat anything this morning."

"Go over to The House of Dew across the street. I had a drink called a Dewdrop there, and it tasted just like ripe peaches," said Oliver. "Try the luffkins, too. They are sort of like potato pancakes."

Blake hesitated. "I want to look in a couple more stores. How about I meet you and Rafe in The House of Dew in a few minutes?"

"I'll go with you," said Oliver, following Blake. "I haven't had a chance to look in all the stores yet."

Rafe and Baylor crossed the street to The House of Dew, anxious to fill their growling bellies. As soon as they opened the door, a gentle draft of air blew it closed.

"Hello—lo—lo. I have something—thing—thing for you—you—you," said the Parrot Wind. A rolled-up sheet of paper wafted down into Rafe's hand. "Read it—it—it. Danger—ger—ger. Real—al—al."

The wind vanished.

"That was bizarre." Rafe unrolled the paper and saw the now familiar handwriting and red ink.

LISTEN TO THE WIND FOR IT BRINGS YOU WISDOM.

Baylor tilted the paper towards herself. "Do you have any idea what that means?"

Rafe screwed his forehead into a scowl, shook his head, and shrugged his shoulders. It was just as vague as the other note Rafe had found shoved underneath his door on the first day of classes. The one that read: "*Nothing is as it seems. Follow the connections and you will find the answers that you seek.*"

Over the past few weeks, Rafe had given a lot of thought to the note under his door. Nothing in Mystfira was *ever* as it seemed. That wasn't a news flash. He'd tried following the connections that seemed important, and everything always led right back to Baylor; however, she didn't know why they were in Mystfira any more than he did. If Luke had something to say to Rafe, why couldn't he just come right out and say it.

Jamming the paper into his back pocket, Rafe opened the door to The House of Dew. When they crossed the threshold, it was like stepping into an actual jungle. Real trees, plants, and flowers formed comfortable tables and chairs and provided a spellbinding canopy above the customers. The fairies sure knew how to make a place look enticing.

A beautiful young fairy told them that they could eat and drink as much as they wanted for one gold nugget each. Rafe and Baylor paid the fairy and seated themselves at a window so they could still see Dressage Street. Their gargoyle guards remained on the roof of The Treasure Trove, their stony eyes trained on The House of Dew.

Baylor ordered a drink called an Angel Slipper, and Rafe ordered one called a Flaming Arrow. When Rafe's drink arrived, he was stunned to find that it was actually on fire. The waitress told him to wait until the flames subsided before drinking the concoction. Rafe's Flaming Arrow tasted of honey, raisins, and a hint

of lemon, while Baylor's Angel Slipper was a thick, frosty mixture that tasted like caramel and almonds. They split a delicious order of luffkins and waited for the other children to return.

As they gazed out the window, they saw a black-cloaked figure with its hood up slipping into The Treasure Trove, accompanied by a huge jet-black dog.

"Who is that?" whispered Baylor. "I didn't see anyone else dressed like that today."

Rafe shivered. "I don't know, but I just got a creepy-crawly feeling under my skin."

"I'm going to go see," Baylor hurried to the door and pushed out of the shop.

Rafe watched her dash across the street and duck into The Treasure Trove. A few minutes later, the black-cloaked figure and dog exited. Casting furtive looks over his shoulder, the figure slunk down an alley.

Rand and Baylor emerged a few minutes later. Baylor had both arms pressed against her middle, and Rand had one arm around her waist, half-walking, half-dragging Baylor towards The House of Dew.

Rafe rushed to the door. "What's up?"

Rand eased Baylor into her seat, and Baylor unfolded her arms. Rafe saw a bloody towel wrapped around her arm.

He gasped. "What happened?"

"A dog bit me. It looks worse than it really is."

"I couldn't believe it," said Rand. "After you guys left, a dark spirit came into the store. Seamus told me to hide in a corner, and then I heard them arguing with each other."

"About what?" Rafe asked.

"The dark spirit wanted to buy all the silver chalices in the store, and he wanted to know if Seamus had ever come across

the Fairy Grimoire or the Hammer of Justice in any of his travels. Then Baylor came into the store, and the dog just attacked her. Seamus went wild! He threw a magical cage around the dark spirit and beat the dog off Baylor with his shillelagh.”

“I think we should go find Thomas and have him take a look at your arm, Bay.”

“No way! I told you it looks way worse than it is.” She unwrapped the towel from her arm, revealing two large fang marks. “See, it’s stopped bleeding. It’s only a puncture wound.”

“Seamus said the dog was a hellhound,” said Rand, turning a sick shade of pale as he gazed at Baylor’s arm. “He threw Vexxon and his dog out of the store and threatened them with bodily harm should they ever return.”

Rafe felt his heart skip a beat. That was the name he’d heard Seamus mutter when he saw the V burned into Baylor’s skin.

“Uh . . . I’ve got to go get a drink. Looking at your arm is making me feel woozy,” Rand said, staggering away from the table.

Rafe met Baylor’s gaze. “Who is Vexxon?” he asked.

Baylor looked around to make sure no one was listening and whispered, “That’s what Seamus called the dark spirit that was in the store. If he’s looking for the silver chalice, Fairy Grimoire, and the Hammer of Justice, *he’s* the one trying to open the Well of Wisdom.”

Rafe blew out his breath and made a motoring sound with his lips. “This is not good.”

“I heard Seamus say Vexxon when he saw my wrist the day we caught our xants. I know you did, too. What do you suppose Vexxon has to do with me?”

“We don’t know that he has anything to do with you.”

“Oh, come on,” she snapped. “There is a mark in the shape

of a V burned into my wrist, and Vexxon's dog attacked me the minute I stepped into that store. This isn't a coincidence. I asked Seamus to tell me what he knows, but he refused. I need to find out what is going on. Will you please . . . please help me?"

Rafe patted Baylor's shoulder. "Of course I'll try to help you. You're shivering. Are you cold?" He pulled her coat off the back of the chair and slipped it around her shoulders.

"You can't tell Blake about this," said Baylor. "Rand promised that he wouldn't, and you have to promise me, too. He'll go insane with worry."

Rafe threw his hands into the air. "Fine. It's your story to tell, but just so you know, if Blake asks me about it, I'm not going to lie to him."

An icy sense of foreboding began to form in Rafe's gut. He was hoping the feeling was coming from the Flaming Arrow he just drank, but he was pretty certain that wasn't the case.



Chapter Twenty

Aware and Unaware Angels

“Remember, guardians must be proficient in all five methods of celestial combat,” said Madri Uriah to the students in the Advanced Swordsmanship class. “It’s imperative that a guardian be skilled in hand-to-hand combat as well as the use of a spear, bow, slingshot, and sword.”

Rafe glanced at the clock in the Adomis practice arena. His swordsmanship class was running late again. Normally he didn’t mind, but he’d promised to meet the twins after class today.

“Mr. Ryder, are we keeping you from something important?” asked Madri Isabo.

“No, ma’am,” said Rafe, lowering his chin.

“Can you tell me what Madri Uriah has been talking to the class about for the last twenty minutes?”

Rafe met the madri’s gaze. His mind was a blank and he was sure Madri Isabo knew it. “No, ma’am,” he said again.

“*Tch, tch, tch*,” said Madri Isabo, clicking her tongue. “I’m disappointed. Madri Uriah was reviewing the same three points we have been stressing since class began two hours ago.”

“Yohanna Guardian, tell Mr. Ryder what he needs to know before we dismiss class,” said Madri Uriah, looking at a strong, lithe female student.

Yohanna shot Rafe a brief, unsympathetic look. “First,” she said, “our minds are our most important weapon, and they must always be as sharp as our swords. Second, it is imperative to

know our opponents and never underestimate them. Thirdly, we must know our own strengths and weaknesses.”

When class was dismissed, Rafe charged out of the Adomis arena without looking back. He hadn’t bothered to change out of his practice clothes, partially because he was late, but mostly to avoid any further chastisement from his much older classmates.

He raced through the library at top speed, hoping that Prentiss and Zane wouldn’t stop him. Normally it took fifteen minutes to get to the front of the library, but, today, Rafe made it in less than nine. He skipped down the steps of the library to the polished red street, and sprinted towards The House of Dew.

As Rafe neared his destination, he noticed Seamus in a dispute with a group of young fairies. They whirled around the leprechaun in tight circles, trying to pull something from a basket at his feet.

“Clear off!” shouted Seamus, swinging his shillelagh at the little creatures.

The fracas grew louder and louder until Thomas and Blake emerged from The House of Dew to investigate the disturbance.

Thomas positioned himself in front of Seamus and shooed the fairies away with his hands. “Leave the leprechaun alone before one of you gets hurt.”

The fairies flew a short distance away, but continued to look at the basket of rocks at Seamus’ feet.

“What’s all the fuss about?” asked Rafe.

“I was goin’ ta sell me winrups, and den I was accosted by da ferocious fairies.”

Blake laughed. “Ferocious, huh? Why would the fairies want a bunch of rocks?”

“Winrups er not rocks,” said Seamus, glaring at Blake. “Der a tasty treat from da Ring of Rocks.”

Thomas nodded. "Only a leprechaun can tell the difference between a rock and a winrup, which means they're the only ones that can harvest them. A leprechaun with winrups is a popular fellow."

Seamus lifted his overly-full basket of winrups. "I'm off ta peddle me wares."

As the leprechaun began to waddle away, a winrup wobbled and fell out of his basket.

Blake scooped it up before one of the fairies could get to it. "It feels like a rock," he said, twirling it around in his fingers. Shrugging, he stuffed the winrup into his mouth.

"You are so gross." Rafe made a face as he stared at Blake in disgust.

"What?" asked Blake, talking with his mouth full. "The streets are clean enough to eat off of here."

"What does it taste like?" asked Rafe.

"It's wicked good. It's kind of like a donut. It's sticky and sweet after you bite into it," said Blake, licking his fingers. "Don't tell Baylor I ate off the street. She'd have a fit."

"Where is she?"

"Oh yeah—that," said Blake, exchanging a meaningful look with Thomas. "Baylor's locked herself in her room. She overheard Shar and some of the other students talking in the hallway after our last class. Shar said that dark spirits exist on Earth in human form. Between the ages of twelve and thirteen, they develop an identifying mark somewhere on their bodies so that their masters can recognize them. Baylor freaked out. She said that she has the mark of a dark spirit on her wrist."

"I will go and speak to her," said Thomas. "Your sister is not a dark spirit. A dark spirit would not have a guardian angel. Luke was her guardian."

"Speaking of Luke, that reminds me." Rafe pulled a note from his pocket and handed it to Thomas. "Luke had the Parrot Wind deliver this note to me a week-and-a-half ago. I don't know what to make of it."

"I wish I knew what Luke was trying to tell you. Perhaps when the wind learns your language better, you'll understand."

"I'm not going to hold my breath. The wind can't even get our names right," said Rafe. "On good days, Blake's name is Gate Winblank, and on bad days, it's B. W. Ekal Etagin."

"Hey, I like that last one, and you're not one to talk, Reef Derry," said Blake with a chuckle. "Anyway, back to Baylor. I told her that she couldn't possibly be a dark spirit, but she doesn't believe me."

Thomas sighed. "Baylor bears the mark of the dark spirit who attacked her on the beach in Clifton Cove."

"I know," said Rafe. "I was there when she got struck by the lightning ball, remember?"

"Technically, it wasn't lightning," said Thomas. "It was a demon ball."

Blake's eyes bulged. "What are you two talking about? My sister got hit by lightning? She told me she burned herself on an iron!"

Thomas looked confused. "I thought you knew what happened to your sister, but, in a way, her being marked is a good thing."

"A dark spirit tried to kill my sister with something called a demon ball and it's a *good* thing? Are you nuts? What is wrong with you?" shouted Blake.

"The only one that can harm her now is the one who marked her. She is safe from all other dark spirits."

"Oh, what a relief," said Blake, shooting Thomas a hateful

glare. "There's only *one* dark spirit after my sister, and *he's* the only one that can hurt her. I feel so much better now."

"Vexxon," muttered Rafe.

Thomas turned to Rafe with a look of surprise. "How do you know that name?"

"When Seamus saw Baylor's wrist, he mumbled the name Vexxon, but that's not all of it. Vexxon was in The Treasure Trove a week-and-a-half ago, and his dog bit Baylor. And, before you ask why I didn't tell you," said Rafe, turning to Blake, "your sister swore Rand and me to secrecy."

"The girl is lucky she wasn't torn apart," Thomas said.

Blake was still too stunned to speak.

"I will warn the Sakal that Vexxon was here, and then I will go talk to your sister. I am sure Vexxon will not dare to show his face in Mystfira again." With that said, Thomas turned and walked down the street towards the palace.

"You okay?" asked Rafe, nudging his friend.

"Yes," said Blake. "Don't you *ever* keep anything from me again, especially if it has anything to do with Baylor. I don't care if she swears you to secrecy."

Rafe crossed his heart with his finger. "I promise."

"I'm going into The Treasure Trove to buy Baylor a present."

"But you already got her one."

"Considering everything I just heard, I think she *deserves* another one," said Blake, stepping through the door of the Treasure Trove.

"I'll wait for you out here," said Rafe as the door slammed in his face.

Rafe closed his eyes and leaned against the wall. He knew Blake needed some time to cool down.

A breeze tugged at Rafe's sleeve. "Hello—lo—lo. Danger—

CHAPTER TWENTY

ger—ger. Gerand—and—and. Real—al—al. Danger—ger—ger. Liar—ar—ar.”

“I’m really not in the mood right now, and I am not Gerand.”

Listen—en—en to me, Reef—eef—eef.”

“That’s Rafe.”

“Rafe—afe—afe,” repeated the wind. “Danger—ger—ger. Gerand—and—and. Real—al—al.

Rafe shook his head. “When you’ve learned to tell the difference between me and Gerand, come back and we’ll talk.”

“But—but—but . . .”

“No buts,” said Rafe. “Go talk to someone else.”

The Parrot Wind swooshed away with an indignant sigh as Blake exited The Treasure Trove carrying a bag.

“Are we cool?” asked Rafe, looking at his friend.

“Yeah. We’re okay, as long as you remember what I said. Look here,” said Blake, shoving the bag under Rafe’s nose. “I got Baylor a jewelry box.”

“Are you going to give her your presents at the party tomorrow night?”

“Nah, Baylor and I decided to wait until Christmas day. That reminds me. Make sure you come to the tower room as soon as you wake up. Baylor and I got you an amazing present, even though you don’t deserve it at the moment.”

“What a coincidence,” said Rafe, ignoring Blake’s jab. “Baylor and I went in on a present for you, too.”

“Come on,” said Blake, glancing at his wristwatch. “I promised to help Deidre decorate the ballroom at Cliff House for her big party tomorrow. Did she give you an assignment?”

“I’ve been asked to make popcorn balls, peanut brittle, and cookies with the girls,” said Rafe.

“That’s just great. She’s *my* cousin, but *you* get the cushy job.”

"I'll take your job . . . if you want me to."

Blake snorted out a laugh. "I know better than to ruffle the diva's feathers. I'll do what she says. I have to admit, I thought it was dumb to have a party at first, but I'm glad that we're doing it. It will take our minds off the fact the angels get to go home for a week and we don't."

Rafe nodded at Blake as the boys walked back to Cliff House. The angelic students and Ryder-Knight students were both getting a one week winter vacation beginning tomorrow right after their last class. It really didn't seem fair that the angels could return home when the Ryder-Knight students couldn't. Blake was right. Deidre's party would be a welcome distraction.

When the boys returned to Cliff House, Rafe met the girls in the kitchen and Blake went to the ballroom. Baylor was noticeably absent from the small group of girls, and when Rafe asked about it, Parker said Baylor was putting together some party favors in the privacy of her own room.

Rafe took it in stride when Parker put an apron around his waist and tied it in a pretty bow behind his back. The girls soon learned that Rafe had no real value in the kitchen other than to be a rascal. He teased them into fits of laughter. At one point, he pestered Parker so much that she chased him around the kitchen with a wooden spoon.

By the end of the night, Rafe was exhausted. He fell into bed, comforting himself with the thought that tomorrow was the last day of classes for a week.

The next day dragged on, but at last, Rafe found himself sitting in the final class of the day. For some reason, the virtue madri, Estel, had picked today, of all days, to start a new unit in Angelology devoted to the study of guardian angels.

"I know this is your last class before break, so we're going to

do something fun,” said Madri Estel. “I have a brief story that I would like someone to read to the class. Anyone?”

Haven raised her hand and walked to the front of the room. The brown eyed, pony-tailed girl was the most studious angelic pupil, so it came as no surprise to Rafe that she’d volunteered.

Madri Estel handed her an open book and Haven began to read.

“It seemed to Lola that all she ever did was help her mother take care of her siblings and complete an endless list of chores. Today, the thirteen-year-old girl wanted nothing more than a few minutes to herself to have some fun.

“It was a beautiful winter day, and she was determined to go ice-skating. There was a pond across the road from her house, but she certainly couldn’t go there. Her mother would see her and allow her brothers and sisters to come out to the pond, too, and Lola had no intention of babysitting today. She’d have to hike a mile through the woods to an isolated pond behind her house to be alone to skate, but it would be worth the trip.

“She happily trudged through the woods until she reached the remote pond. The ice was enticing and as smooth as glass. Lola put on her skates, strung her boots together, slung them over her shoulder, and began to skate. In high spirits and grateful to be alone, she skated all the way to the end of the two-mile pond.

“A healthy red glow colored Lola’s cheeks as she began the skate home. She could hear the ice cracking around her, but being a county girl, Lola wasn’t too concerned. After all, it’s common to hear a pond settle, particularly on a warm day.

"Suddenly, Lola heard a horrible sound and felt the ice beneath her shift. A long, jagged fracture opened next to her in the ice. Knowing better than to panic, Lola threw her boots from her shoulder and carefully lowered herself to her knees, stretching out over the frozen pond. She tried to distribute her weight as evenly as possible over the ice as she inched her way towards the shore. She had only managed to shimmy a few feet when she heard another loud crack, and the ice beneath her gave way, plunging her body into the frigid water.

"Thrashing around, she tried to get her arms back up onto the ice shelf, but she couldn't get a grip on it. As she slipped up to her neck in the water, Lola felt the bottom of the pond with the tips of her skates and her panic subsided. If she could touch the bottom, then she wasn't going to drown.

"The pond, however, was not done with Lola, and it began sucking her into its muddy depths. Just as her nose was about to go under the water, Lola felt herself rising and she kicked and flailed. By some miracle, she found herself on the lip of the ice, half in and half out of the water. Then, quite astonishingly, she found herself sliding along the ice until she was at the edge of the pond.

"Lola was numb with cold, but a single thought repeated over and over in her head. You must get up. You must get up. You must get up. She sat up, but she was still so far away from the path in the woods that led home, and she was so cold that she could barely think. At that moment, another thought entered her head. If you skate, you will be warm. If you skate, you will be warm.

“Lola didn’t want to tempt fate by going back out onto the ice, but she knew it would be faster to skate to the path that led home, rather than walk around the pond to reach it. Dripping wet and shivering, Lola began the long skate home. She skated until she could skate no more, and then she slumped onto the pond in an icy pile.

“Out of the corner of her eyes, Lola thought she saw something move. She turned her head and blinked her eyes, not daring to believe it. There was someone else on the ice! No one had been on the pond when she arrived, but now there was someone there ice fishing, and he was coming to help her. It was her neighbor, Mr. Smith.

“Mr. Smith took off his coat and wrapped it around her. He covered her with a blanket and loaded her onto the sled that he had used to tow his fishing gear out onto the ice. With great speed, he pulled Lola to the back door of her house where she thanked him and retreated into the safety and warmth of her home.”

“Now, students, let me show you what really took place,” said Madri Estel, taking the book from Haven and placing it on the floor.

The pages of the large book turned into a movie screen, and Rafe and his classmates watched as the story played out on the pages before them. This time, however, they could see a young guardian angel walking beside the girl as she hiked along.

The guardian was with Lola when she fell through the ice and into the pond. As she sunk into the mud, the angel dove under the water and lifted the girl on his back. With a flick of his wing, Lola flew out of the water and onto the edge of the ice. The

guardian then reappeared on the surface of the ice. He gave one mighty tug and slid the girl to the edge of the pond.

As Lola lay cold and still, the angel cradled her head and repeated into her ear, "You must get up." When the girl sat up, the angel whispered to her again, "If you skate, you will be warm. If you skate, you will be warm."

Lola's flailing skates had cut the angel's wings as he was trying to push her to safety, so the angel called to his jarvartan, who came to heal him. Both the angel and the jarvartan stayed close to the girl as she skated for home.

When Mr. Smith placed the dry coat on Lola and put her on his sled, her guardian sat behind her, wrapping his arms around her to warm her. On the way to Lola's house, the jarvartan helped the old man pull the heavy sled through the woods.

Madri Estel smoothed her pale blue gown and walked to the front of class again. "I used this story to begin our unit on guardian angels. There are two types of guardians, and this story illustrates that perfectly. The first angel that we saw is called an 'aware' guardian. You will notice that the angel had his wings and a jarvartan companion. The second angel that we saw in the story was called an 'unaware.'"

"I didn't see a second angel," said Haven.

"Mr. Smith was the second guardian angel," said the madri. "Unaware guardians are sent to Earth in other forms; however, they are not sent with a jarvartan. Unaware angels are fully human. They can be a friend, a family member, or a complete stranger. They may guard a charge for their whole lives, or they may be present only once—at the right time and the right place—to save a life."

"I'm a guardian angel, but I most certainly do *not* wish to be sent to Earth as a human," said Shar, tossing her thin blonde hair.

"That means we can't practice divine magic. Being human here in Mystfira is bad enough, but having to suffer the same fate twice is unthinkable. When do we find out if we are an unaware?"

"You won't know until you graduate," replied Madri Estel, "There is no use giving it much thought until then. Class is now dismissed. Please, enjoy your winter holiday."

"Okay, Ryder-Knight students," said Deidre, clapping her hands for attention as the students were leaving class. "You have just enough time to get ready and meet me in the dining room of Cliff House at five-thirty, sharp."

"You heard the boss," said Blake to Rafe. "We better step on it."

"I still haven't wrapped my present for Parker yet," said Rafe, shuffling through the palace hallway.

"I haven't wrapped Audra's, either," said Blake, turning to Baylor. "Could—?"

"Just bring them to my room and I'll do it," said Baylor with a sigh.

The boys brought their presents to Baylor's room to be wrapped, then hurried back to their rooms before Baylor changed her mind. An hour later, Rafe heard a knock on his door.

"Come on, Rafe," Blake called from the hallway. "It's time to go to the dining room."

Rafe combed one last stubborn lock of hair into place and opened the door. Blake and Baylor were waiting for him in the hallway. Baylor's dark hair had been swept into a long ethereal-looking braid dotted with little red holly berries, which perfectly matched the deep red of her dress.

"Wow," said Rafe, stepping into the hallway. "I almost didn't recognize you with your hair like that. You look great."

Baylor's face colored as she handed him Parker's present. "Poppe did it for me. It's not too much, is it?"

"No," said Blake. "You look very pretty. Next party, I'm asking Poppe to do my hair, too."

Rafe hooted. "I don't think you'll look quite so stunning with red berries in your hair."

Baylor giggled, and the three of them headed towards the dining room. The dining table was beautifully decorated and set for thirteen guests. The room hummed with anticipation and excitement.

Upon seeing her last guests enter the room, Deidre placed herself at the head of the table and began to clink a glass with a spoon. The students quieted and gave her their attention. "If you haven't already done so, please leave your presents on the sideboard by the door, then find your place card at the table and have a seat. Tonight, with the help of Madri Fey and her little fairies, an unbelievable feast has been prepared for us."

Murmuring in anticipation, the children searched for their seats. Deidre seated herself at the head of the table, and Blake found that he had been placed at the opposite end of the table from her. Rafe and Baylor found their cards on either side of Blake. Rafe was relieved to see Parker sitting at the other end of the table next to Deidre. He had a tendency to get flustered around Parker, and he was apt to drop food on himself.

"Being in Mystfira has been stressful and upsetting for everyone, and I know how many tears we have all shed. However, there is no sadness allowed this evening, and we will all be gracious and charitable to everyone tonight . . . no matter what their offenses may have been in the past," said Deidre, her gaze coming to rest on Baylor.

Baylor turned scarlet and looked at her plate.

"Madri Fey, we're ready!" called Deidre.

Madri Fey entered the room, followed by some of her

youngest fairies. Wide-eyed and innocent, they carried serving dishes full of steaming food to the table.

The air in the dining room soon filled with lovely smells and lively conversation. Deidre and Madri Fey had worked hard to make sure each student would have something they loved to eat. As a result, every conceivable holiday food had been prepared. Rafe loved the Scottish smoked salmon with dill mustard sauce, and Deidre had even made sure there was a traditional English Christmas pudding just for him.

After the meal, Deidre led the Ryder-Knight students into the grand entrance hallway and addressed them breathlessly. "Madri Roanin and Madri Avalon have volunteered to chaperone our party tonight, and they are waiting for us inside. Now, you students who celebrate Christmas must promise not to be too disappointed. I couldn't get us a Christmas tree."

A few low moans rippled through the group.

"I know, I know, but let's not dwell on it. We'll have our gift exchange as soon as we get inside, then we'll dance and mingle. I've picked out some fabulous music," Deidre said, flinging the door open to the ballroom.

The Ryder-Knight students stood awestruck when they entered. Deidre and her entourage of boys had decorated the room with simple, but elegant decorations. Twinkling white lights had been strung along the walls near the ceiling. Giant red bows and shimmering wreaths were strategically placed around the room along with a multitude of candles in every shape and size.

"This is brilliant," said Rafe to the twins. "Say what you will about your cousin—the girl sure knows how to throw a cracking party."

Having made short work of the dishes with her little fairies,

Madri Fey allowed them to peek into the ballroom before returning to the Fairy Forest.

"It looks lovely in here, my dears" said the madri from the door.

"It's very nice, but I wish there was a Christmas tree," Oliver said in a wistful tone. "It's the only thing keeping this room from being perfect."

Madri Fey entered the room wearing a mischievous smile. She plucked a sprig of greenery from a wreath on the wall and placed it on the floor in a corner of the room. The end of her scepter began to glow, and she touched it with her finger, which filled with light. Pointing her blazing finger at the little green branch on the floor she said,

*"Give them what they wish to see
And grow this sprig into a tree.
Decorate it with shiny bangles
And lots and lots of pretty spangles."*

Right before the children's eyes, the tiny green branch grew into the most beautiful Christmas tree Rafe had ever seen. The Ryder-Knight children clapped and cheered while Madri Fey giggled.

"Now everything is perfect," cried Oliver.

Deidre clapped her hands. "Okay, everybody. Find the person whose name you drew out of the hat and give him or her their present."

Rafe found Parker, wearing a beautiful deep green dress, standing next to the Christmas tree and presented her with the gift that Baylor had wrapped so beautifully.

She giggled, "You won't believe this, but I had your name, too," she said, trading boxes with him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Parker unwrapped her gift with gentle hands. "I love it! It's perfect. You have exquisite taste," she said, gazing at the music box in delight. "Thank you so much. Now, open yours."

Rafe ripped off his wrapping paper. Nestled inside the box, he found a baseball glove. His face expanded into a wide grin. "Thank you, Parker. I've always wanted one of these."

"I know. Blake told me. Do you mind if I go show my music box to Deidre?"

"Of course not," he said. "Go."

Feeling pleased with himself, Rafe strolled over to the refreshment table to talk to Blake and Oliver.

"Blake thought Baylor had his name. I sure had him fooled," said Oliver. "I wasn't sure what to get him until Baylor suggested a gift certificate to The House of Dew or The Wind and Wings Tavern, but being the generous guy that I am . . . I got him both."

"Baylor has some pretty great ideas," said Rafe. "Who had her name? What did she get?"

"I don't know who had her name, but I know she got a slingshot," replied Oliver.

Rafe's heart sank into his stomach. "Did anyone else here get a slingshot?" he asked, looking around the room.

"No, she was the only one," said Blake. "She says she really likes it."

"So where is she now?" asked Rafe. "I don't see her."

"She said her head hurt, and she went to lie down for a few minutes," replied Blake.

Rafe scowled and bit his lip as he began to piece things together. When Deidre had asked the Ryder-Knight students to draw names, he'd watched most of the other students draw twice. It was pretty safe to assume that each time Baylor's name had been selected first, the other students had used their second

draw to get a different name, and then they'd thrown Baylor's name back into the mix. Baylor had been the last person to draw a name, and Rafe bet the only name left in the hat was her own.

"Parker is trying to get your attention. Stop scowling and go see what she wants," said Blake, giving Rafe a push.

As Rafe walked across the ballroom floor towards Parker, all he could think about was Baylor. He had a hunch that she'd gone to her room to avoid being questioned about the gift. He felt a twinge of guilt as he looked into Parker's sparkling blue eyes. Baylor was sitting alone in her room while he was at a party, enjoying himself. He was a rotten friend to Baylor but, unfortunately for her, he was one of the only friends she had.



Chapter Twenty-One

The Hammer of Justice

When Rafe woke on Christmas day, he felt more homesick than ever. He missed his parents and Lady Jane. It had always been Lady Jane's custom to spend the Christmas holiday over in England with them. Rafe's eyes grew watery as he thought of his parents and grandmother.

On Christmas Eve, they would light candles, sip tea, and listen to Rafe's father play Christmas carols until it was time to go watch the local children perform the nativity play. Then he'd wake the next morning to find Lady Jane and his parents slipping a ham into the oven and chatting over cups of tea. His mother would give Rafe a cup of tea too, and then they would gather around the Christmas tree to open their stockings and presents.

It was no use thinking of home. Rafe tumbled out of bed and splashed water on his face. He dressed and ran up the narrow stone steps to the tower room, his present for Baylor tucked under his arm. When Rafe poked his head into the room, he was surprised to see the cobalt blue velvet curtains and cushions had been changed to a bright red color. He had also expected it to be quite cold in the unheated tower room, but it was warm and cozy instead.

Blake was sitting on one of the window seats surrounded by an ocean of wrapping paper and colorful ribbons. He was attempting to tie a bow on one of the presents, but failing miserably.

"Happy Christmas," said Rafe.

"To you, too," replied Blake. "How does this bow look?"

"Terrifying."

"Yeah, I was afraid of that," said Blake. "How come the present you're holding looks so good?"

"Because I asked one of the ladies in The Three Sisters shop to wrap it for me," said Rafe, looking around the tower room. "When did you and Baylor have time to change the curtains and decorate?"

"We didn't. Poppe and Potts did it this morning. They just left with Baylor. I had to send her away for a few minutes so I could wrap her presents."

Rafe dropped his gift for Baylor onto a window seat and noticed a small table piled high with biscuits, scones, cakes, and fresh fruit. There was also milk, juice, and tea.

"Did they bring breakfast, too?" asked Rafe, selecting a biscuit to nibble on. "How did you manage to get it so warm up here?"

Blake pointed to a log lying against the bottom of one of the window seats. "The two little squirts brought us breakfast and the coolest thing ever—Brandire wood. Put your hand on it."

Rafe leaned over the log. It was throwing off a significant amount of heat without any type of flame. "No, thanks. I'll pass."

"That's what I thought at first," said Blake, "but it won't burn you. It doesn't give off any heat at all when you are touching it. It only gives off heat when you're at a safe distance, and the wood is never consumed. No smoke, either."

Rafe heard a knocking sound coming from underneath Blake's seat. "May I come in now?" called Baylor.

Blake scooted off the window seat and opened it. "Yes, and when you see my wrapping job, please try to remember that it's the thought that counts."

Baylor poked her head up through the window seat. "I come

bearing gifts," she said, handing Blake two gift-wrapped boxes before climbing out and into the tower.

Blake placed a long narrow box in Rafe's lap. "This one's for you. Open it now. Baylor and I have been dying to give it to you."

Rafe smiled and ripped the paper from the gift. Lifting the cover from the box, he saw a sword sheathed in a brown leather scabbard.

"It's the type of sword the angels use. We bought a scabbard that fits diagonally across your back, too," said Baylor. "Do you like it?"

"I love it," Rafe whispered.

"Now, it's your turn," said Baylor, presenting Blake with the other box. "It's from Rafe and me."

Blake didn't need to be asked twice; he tore the present open. "A bow and quiver full of arrows?" he asked. "This is the best present I have ever gotten!"

"Now you're both armed and dangerous," said Baylor with a giggle.

"Okay, Bay, it's your turn," said Blake. He grabbed his pathetically wrapped gifts and sat down next to his twin.

Baylor smiled and opened the first gift, carefully removing the paper. She stared in delight at a music box with flowers twirling about a meadow. "It's wonderful. Thank you."

"Rafe told me you'd like it. Here's your next one," said Blake, shoving another present under her nose.

Baylor's mouth dropped open when she unwrapped the beautiful jewelry box that Blake had purchased. She threw her arms around him, hugging him.

"Okay, okay . . . you're welcome, Bay. There's another gift from Seamus in the bottom of the jewelry box. Take a look."

Baylor flipped open a small box. "Aw, it's a little silver ring,"

she said, slipping it onto a finger. "It has an inscription, but it's not in a language I can understand."

Rafe retrieved his package and handed it to Baylor. "This is from me."

Blake prodded Baylor's foot with his own. "Go on. Open it, or do you want Rafe to return it?"

"Of course I want it," said Baylor. She tore the wrapping from the box and gasped. "This is the prettiest scarf I have ever seen." She wrapped the purplish-pink scarf around her neck. "You're too good to me, Rafe Ryder."

Rafe nodded and forced a smile. He hadn't been good to Baylor at all and she knew it. He'd let her spend Christmas Eve alone in her room while he spent the evening having fun at a party, but it was time for him to make it up to her.

"Your brother and I have one more present for you."

"We do?" asked Blake, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. Tomorrow we're taking your sister to the library to see what we can find out about Vexxon. The second rule in Swordsmanship class is to know your enemy, so we're going to find out who Vexxon is and what we're up against."

"Thank you," said Baylor, smiling at the boys.

"Now, let's eat. I'm starving," said Blake.

"The tea's gone cold," said Rafe.

"Not to worry," said Baylor. "Let me show you what Poppe gave me just in case that happened."

Baylor pulled a tiny grain the size of a rice kernel from her pocket and crushed it into powder between her fingertips. Sprinkling the glittering little grains over the teapot, she chanted:

*"Steep and steam little pot,
Make the water boiling hot."*

The pot perked to attention and fizzed; steam swam from the spout.

"What did you do?" asked Rafe, staring at the pot.

"Magic," replied Baylor. She picked up the teapot and poured. Rafe a cup of tea.

"Wicked awesome. My sister can do fairy magic. I'm thinking this new ability is not something we need to share with the other Ryder-Knight students, though."

"Don't worry, I have no intention of telling anyone, except for maybe Simon. Have either of you seen him this morning?" she asked, opening the doors to the balcony and stepping outside.

Rafe and Blake were shoving food in their mouths when Baylor flew back into the room a few minutes later. Her cheeks were cherry red and large snowflakes glistened in her hair.

"Come look, you two! It's snowing!" she exclaimed. "Great big fluffy white flakes. I saw Madri Fey out on the back lawn waving her scepter; then it started to snow."

Rafe and Blake darted out the doors and on to the balcony. They dashed around the turreted tower and saw that it wasn't snowing on the palace gardens in front of Cliff House. The snow was confined within the granite walls of the enormous back lawn.

Blake's eyes sparkled. "I think Madri Fey conjured up a Nor'easter."

"Let's tell the others and go outside," said Rafe.

The children scrambled out of the tower room. Rafe and Blake knocked on all the bedroom doors, alerting the others to the snowfall. Cries of delight echoed throughout the house as, one after another, the students spilled onto the back lawn of Cliff House.

Within fifteen minutes, there was over a foot of fluffy white

snow on the ground and Madri Fey slowed the snowfall to occasional flakes. "For atmosphere," she giggled.

The children were elated when they saw the toboggans and sleds Madri Fey had provided, and they were soon sliding down the long sloping lawn of Cliff House. Leopold took great delight in chasing the sleds down the hill, while Simon performed daring aerial acrobatics. When the children tired of sledding, they slung snowballs at each other from built snow forts. They even had a contest to see who could build the largest snowman.

It was mid-afternoon by the time Madri Fey called the children into the butterfly conservatory to eat leftovers from the previous evening's dinner party. Rafe stuffed himself so full of turkey and ham sandwiches, it was hard for him to even stand up.

Deidre decided some holiday games were in order and organized a game of charades, which the children played for hours before falling into bed exhausted.

When Rafe woke the next day, he headed straight to the library to meet the twins. He found them exchanging pleasantries with the calmer of the two librarians, Prentiss.

"Another student?" said Prentiss in surprise. "Zane and I did not expect to see *any* students here during vacation. You will find the library is crawling with fairies today."

Prentiss wasn't exaggerating. There were eleven little fairies poring over large picture books at the library desks, but Rafe could see that most of the fairies had chosen to enter their books as characters because there were at least twenty twelve-foot high volumes sprawled open around the floor of the traditional library.

"Why is angelic fiction in the traditional library today?" asked Rafe.

Prentiss leaned towards the students and spoke to them in a low voice. "The fairies prefer to come when the angelic students

are on their breaks. We always have to move the angelic fiction section into the traditional library during holidays so that we can keep a closer eye on the little darlings. They are usually not this well behaved. So far, I have not had to speak to anyone today.”

Baylor looked around. “I don’t see any fairies in the non-fiction section.”

“That is because fairies prefer fiction. They love make-believe and fantasy,” replied Prentiss. “I advise you to come back later if you are planning to use the fiction section.”

“Don’t worry, Prentiss. We’ll be using the non-fiction section. We have some important research to do,” said Blake.

The librarian shrugged. “Suit yourselves. I must say it is refreshing to have serious students working here in the library on a holiday, but should the fairies become rowdy, do not say you were not warned.”

As the children walked to the non-fiction section, Rafe turned to Prentiss. “Where’s Zane?”

Prentiss smiled and looked amused. “One of the fairies fell asleep in a book. It was Zane’s turn to go to the rescue.”

The children laughed and filed into the non-fiction section of the traditional library.

“Maybe we should have told Prentiss why we’re really here,” whispered Blake. “I haven’t a clue where to begin, unless they have a section of the library dedicated to dark spirits.”

“Actually,” said Baylor, “they *do* have a section devoted to Baeldavar and dark spirits, but it’s in the restricted section of the angelic library. That section is limited to teachers only. I heard Haven talking about it one day with some other angelic students.”

“We’re never going to get into that section of the library so we’ll have to find something here,” replied Blake.

“We need to look at any book that seems like it might

mention a dark spirit. Eventually, we should come up with something,” said Rafe. “It’s not a very good plan, but it’s all we’ve got.”

Blake looked at the endless stacks of books around them and moaned. “It’s too bad we can’t enter the books in the non-fiction section of the angelic library. This would be so much easier. The book would do all the work for us.”

The children spent the next few hours combing through the shelves. They took turns bringing armloads of books to one of the library tables where they perused each one for any information that might contain a clue about Vexxon.

It was well past noon when Baylor rushed over to the library table where Rafe and Blake were scouring the pages of their respective books, her body trembling.

“What is it?” Blake whispered. “Did you find something?”

Baylor’s hands shook as she placed a large gold volume on the table in front of them titled *The World of Magical Items*. Inscribed on the front cover in bold black letters were the words, ‘For restricted use only.’

“Look at this book,” said Baylor. “It was misfiled. It should be in the restricted section of the library.”

“So what?” said Blake. “Did you find something in there about Vexxon?”

“In a way,” she replied.

Perplexed, Rafe asked, “Are you saying Vexxon is a magical item instead of a dark spirit?”

Plunking herself into a chair next to Rafe, Baylor shook her head and flipped through the pages of the book until she came to a picture. “There. Look at that,” she said, thumping her finger on the picture. “That’s the Hammer of Justice, and it is not as ‘well and truly hidden’ as Madri Keva thinks.”

The picture of the drum mallet that Rafe had traded with

Seamus at The Treasure Trove taunted Rafe from the page as he stared in disbelief.

"No . . . no," said Rafe. "It can't be."

"It is," insisted Baylor. "Whoever was responsible for hiding that hammer wrapped it up and put it inside the xant cave because they thought it would be safe there. Anyone who found it would fall asleep just like we did before they had a chance to leave the cave."

I can't believe this," whispered Rafe. "I had the Hammer of Justice."

"Look at this," said Baylor, turning the page. "The book also has a picture of the Fairy Grimoire and the silver chalice. It even shows you how to tell the difference between the real chalice and the fake ones. The real chalice has a slightly different silver color than the other cups that the fairies duplicated."

Blake leafed through the pages of the book in horror. "Who had this book last, and how did it get out into the regular library stacks?"

"I don't know, but I do know that we need to give this back to Prentiss right now," said Rafe. "Then we need to go to The Treasure Trove and get the Hammer of Justice back."

"And then what?" asked Baylor.

"We'll take it to the Sakal. They'll know what to do with it," Rafe said.

"Or maybe we could use the hammer to open the Well of Wisdom . . ." said Blake.

"No," said Baylor. "I want to get home as much as you do, but we can't do it that way. We just can't. No one should have that much power."

Rafe looked at his hands in silence. If they could make the tree produce the fruit and Rafe ate it, they could all go home, *and*

Rafe would know how to save his father. He didn't agree with Baylor at all. He could do it, and he was sure he could wield the power wisely.

"Baylor and I can't take the book back to Prentiss without looking guilty," said Blake, swallowing hard and looking as if he had just stolen the crown jewels. "You're British. Stiff upper lip, pip pip, and all that. You do it."

Rafe cocked his head to the side and stared at Blake. "I can't believe you just said that to me."

"I can't either," Baylor said, frowning at Blake.

"Come on. You both know what I mean."

"Fine," Rafe said, grabbing the book and rising from the table. The twins had never been very good at hiding their emotions. "Put the other books back, and I'll meet you at the top of the library steps."

Rafe placed the big gold book under his arm and walked to the library counter where he casually laid the volume down in front of Prentiss and Zane.

"Do you wish to check this book out of the library?" asked Prentiss without looking at the book.

"I don't think you want me to do that," replied Rafe. "It's a book from the restricted section of the library, and it seems to have accidentally got mixed into the regular library stacks."

Prentiss glanced over at the volume. When he saw the title, he choked. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I do not know what happened. Zane and I are not in the habit of making such careless mistakes."

Rafe strolled out of the library with his hands in pockets and a smile on his face. He didn't care what Baylor thought; he had to get the Hammer of Justice, to get everyone home, and to save his father.

He met the twins at the top of the steps and broke into a run. With the twins sprinting after him, Rafe raced to The Treasure Trove and burst through the door.

In the midst of dusting one of the glass counters, Rand glanced up in surprise.

"Is Seamus here?" asked Rafe.

"No, he left me in charge of the shop today while he collects winrups," replied Rand. "I can sell you something, but I'm not allowed to make any gift exchanges without Seamus' permission."

Rafe took a gold nugget from his pocket and placed it on the counter. "I'd like to buy back the drum mallet that I traded with Seamus in December."

Rand gazed at the children. "Why do you need that?"

"Because I bought him a drum for Christmas and he needs his mallet back," said Blake in an exasperated voice. "Why do you care? Where is it?"

"I don't know where it is," said Rand, frowning.

"That's okay. It's all good," said Baylor. "We'll wait for Seamus and ask him."

"You can't do that!" cried Rand.

"Why?" asked Blake.

Rand sighed through pursed lips and lowered his gaze to the floor. "Look—it's not here. I sold it to a customer this morning."

"No! Who did you sell it to?" asked Baylor, her eyes growing large.

Rand rubbed his cheek nervously before answering. "You can't tell Seamus. He'd go crazy if he knew."

"He'd go crazy if he knew what?" asked Rafe. "Who did you sell it to?"

"A dark spirit."

"Are you kidding me? Why would you do that?" said Rafe, balling his fists up at his side.

Rand looked as if he might cry. "Vexxon came into the store right after Seamus left. I just wanted to get him out of the store. He's a pretty scary dude. Ask Baylor. I didn't see the harm in selling him twine on a stick. It doesn't even look like a real drumstick. I can find you a better one. I swear."

"I want the one you sold to Vexxon," said Rafe through gritted teeth.

Baylor looped her arm through Rafe's and nodded her head towards the door. "Shhh . . . calm down." She steered both boys out the door of The Treasure Trove and onto Dressage Street.

"We are in so much trouble," said Blake. "Rand has to get the Hammer of Justice back from Vexxon."

"You're talking nonsense. Rand doesn't know where to find Vexxon any more than we do. Let's go over to The House of Dew and talk about this calmly and rationally. We don't need to get Rand involved in this," replied Baylor.

"Too late," said Rafe in a hoarse whisper. "He's already involved."

"What good would it do to tell Rand? He didn't know he was selling the Hammer of Justice. There is no use being angry with him. He was just trying to get Vexxon out of the shop. You have to remember, Rand was there when I was bitten by the hellhound, and if Vexxon had that dog with him . . . well . . . I'm sure Rand was terrified," said Baylor, hurrying the boys across the street to The House of Dew.

Rafe and Blake were still seething five minutes later when a beautiful fairy placed three Flaming Arrows and some luffkins in front of them.

"Thomas said Vexxon wouldn't have the nerve to come back here, but he did," said Rafe. "Now what are we going to do?"

"I don't know," said Blake, placing his chin in his hand in despair. "This is awful. Not only is Vexxon after my sister, he wants to open the Well of Wisdom, too."

"At the moment, I think that Vexxon wanting to destroy the heavens and plunge the world into eternal darkness may be a *slightly* bigger problem than him wanting to harm me," said Baylor. "We should warn the Sakal that Vexxon has the Hammer of Justice."

"We can't do that," cried Blake. "Do you want to be confined to the grounds of Cliff House again? They probably won't even let us back into the Palace of Angels. They'll make us take all our classes at Cliff House because the Blue Star only protects us from harm while we're there. Besides, Vexxon still needs the Fairy Grimoire and the silver chalice, which he obviously doesn't have yet since the well hasn't been opened. If we could locate one of those things, we can stop Vexxon."

"You do have a point," said Baylor with a miserable sigh, "and if I'm the only one in any physical danger, I don't want us all to be stuck in Cliff House. None of this makes any sense to me, though. If Vexxon is the one that put the Tree of All Knowledge back together and is collecting items to open the Well of Wisdom, why would he take time out to go after me when we were on Earth?"

"That's a good question," asked Blake, narrowing his eyes and looking at his sister. "Did Thomas give you any clues back when he finally convinced you that you weren't a dark spirit?"

Baylor closed her eyes and shook her head. "No. He doesn't know why Vexxon came after me. He said that he didn't think Luke knew, either, because Luke would have shared it with

him. They only know that Vexxon would prefer that I stopped breathing.”

“We need to figure out what’s going on around here,” said Rafe, “but in order to do that, we’re going to have to get into the teacher’s restricted section of the library.”

“Good luck with that,” replied Baylor. “The madrikim are the only ones that are allowed in that section. Plus, there is no way we can do it with Zane and Prentiss there.”

“We just need to be there when there is no librarian on duty,” said Rafe. “What about when the angels are called to the Valley of Shadows?”

“That only happens once a year, right after the new angels get to Mystfira, remember? We’ve been in the library plenty of times when the angelic students have been called to the valley, and Prentiss and Zane don’t go anywhere,” said Baylor.

“You’re right,” Rafe said in a despondent tone.

“I heard an angelic student say Zane and Prentiss take turns watching the library when there is a big Adomis trial in The Rocker,” said Blake, slurping his drink.

Rafe thought for a minute. “If that’s true, then I have an idea,” he said. “With a little help from Poppe and Potts, one of us can magically fall asleep in a book. Then Zane or Prentiss will be forced to rescue the sleeper and leave two of us free to enter the restricted section of the library.”

“That’s insane,” cried Baylor in a low voice.

Blake grinned. “Yes—but it just may be crazy enough to work.”

“But Adomis doesn’t start for weeks and weeks. Are you sure we shouldn’t tell the Sakal about the hammer?” asked Baylor.

“What would that accomplish? They don’t appear to know what’s going on, either,” answered Rafe. “I think we should try to figure this out on our own.”

"I agree," said Blake. "We'll keep going to the library to look in the unrestricted sections every chance we get, but we won't tell the Sakal about Vexxon until we figure out how this is all connected."

"This is all my fault," said Baylor, tears welling up in her eyes.. "I'd give anything if I could get you both home and away from all of this danger. I wake up every morning feeling like such a loser."

Blake made a series of funny faces and finally touched his tongue to the tip of his nose for the grand finale. "Come on, Bay. I love danger. Rafe loves danger. Give me a smile before my face freezes like this."

Trying to keep a straight face, Baylor bit her lip, but finally gave in to laughter.

For the next half-hour, the boys amused Baylor with their funny antics, and they managed to lift her spirits considerably by the time they had all finished their drinks and luffkins. Blake paid the fairies with one of his gift certificates, and the children started back to the palace grounds.

"Hello—lo—lo," whispered the Parrot Wind, mussing the children's hair.

"Hello, yourself," replied Baylor.

"Dark—ark—ark spirit—it—it in the Treasure—sure—sure Trove—ove—ove. Danger—ger—ger liar—ar—ar, Reef—eef—eef."

"It's Rafe and we already know," replied Rafe, jamming his hands in his jacket pocket. He wondered if the Parrot Wind would ever tell him something he didn't already know.

The wind whistled and hissed around Rafe, pulling at his clothing, until it swooshed off with what sounded like a frustrated sigh.



Chapter Twenty-Two

The Kohah

Five days later, the angelic students returned from Araboth and classes began again. Sacred Geometry had been replaced with a class known as Celestial Meditation.

Excited beginner students swarmed the hallways, unable to contain their enthusiasm. Celestial Meditation was the introductory course to the angels' highly anticipated Divine Magic classes, which they were anxious to begin. For some unknown reason, Madri Typhicus was allowing the Ryder-Knight students to take the class with them.

Rafe wasn't the least bit interested in magic, divine or otherwise. He'd found magic to be downright dangerous, especially in the hands of mischievous fairies. He could still feel the knot on the back of his head from one of Poppe and Potts' escapades over the angelic holiday break. They'd enchanted one of the rubber tree plants in the conservatory, and the foolish thing had rolled itself into a ball and flattened everything in its path, including Rafe.

The morning of the first class, Thomas escorted the Ryder-Knight students to a part of the palace that they had never before seen. When they entered the room, they found the angelic students seated in large, comfortable reclining chairs arranged in several semi-circles. The room was painted a soothing muted blue, dimly lit, and devoid of any decoration, except for an enormous glass ball partially lodged in the ceiling.

"It looks like a giant crystal ball," whispered Oliver in awe as the Ryder-Knight students found their seats.

The door banged open and Madri Typhicus entered the room. Eyes sparkling, he faced the students. "Today is an auspicious day. It is the day we begin the class you've all been waiting for. Celestial Meditation is the most important class you will ever take in Mystfira, and it is the foundation on which all angelic abilities rest. The ability to perform divine magic depends solely upon an angel's ability to establish a personal connection with the mind of Araboth."

The angelic students looked confused and Haven Guardian spoke up on their behalf, "Aren't angels *born* with a connection to the seventh heaven? After all, it's our home."

"I'm afraid not," replied the madri. "Angels are not automatically joined to the divine mind of Araboth."

The angelic students tittered and looked at one another nervously.

Madri Typhicus quieted them with a wave of his hand. "In this class, you will learn how to access the divine, but it will take some time. Once you have established your connection, your minds will stay linked to Araboth . . . unless you consciously or unconsciously choose to sever that bond."

Deidre jabbed a finger towards her fellow Ryder-Knight students. "I fail to see the point of us taking this class. We obviously can't connect to Araboth."

"It's true, you won't be able to connect to the divine in the same way as the angelic students, but this is a class with unlimited possibilities, and I suggest you open your mind to those possibilities," said the madri.

"I don't mean to be disagreeable, but I am certain my time would be better spent in a different class. Madri Avalon has an

acting class that I'd rather be attending," replied Deidre, throwing a hand over her chest in a dramatic gesture.

"Moving on," said Madri Typhicus. "There are five different stone figures in the basket beside my chair. When I call your name, choose your favorite and return to your seat. We'll begin with . . . Rafe Ryder."

Rafe walked to the basket on the floor and peered inside. Five variations of carved geometric shapes, which he recognized from Madri Fey's Sacred Geometry class, peeked back up at him. He drew a smiling vesica piscis from the container and returned to his seat.

After all the students had chosen their stone, Madri Typhicus seated himself in his reclining chair and tilted it back to face the glass ball on the ceiling. "I do not want any of you angelic students to become discouraged. Learning to develop a connection with the divine takes time. Please, recline your chairs."

When the students stretched out, Madri Typhicus lifted both hands and pointed towards the ball in the ceiling. "I wish to draw your attention to the Kohah. It is the sphere that you see suspended above you. As you begin class now, the Kohah appears as nothing more than a clear glass ball, but when you've establish a connection with Araboth, you will see what the divine wishes you to see reflected in it."

"This is so stupid," said Deidre, flopping in her chair.

"I'm sure it seems that way to you, Miss Dunn," said the madri. "Give it a chance. Hold the symbol that you have chosen in your hand. Relax, close your eyes, and concentrate on what you have learned about your symbol in Madri Fey's class. When you are ready, open your eyes and look into the Kohah."

"What will we see there?" asked Haven.

"I'm sure none of you will see anything in the Kohah today.

As I keep telling you, it takes time to make a connection with the divine, but we will practice until all of the angelic students in this room are able to do so.”

Deidre thrust her chin forward and frowned. “What about us?” she asked.

“You human students will never see anything in the Kohah, but it is possible that you will be able to connect to the divine in other ways,” said the madri. “You may discover beauty in something you once found repulsive, or you may find sudden insight into a difficult or unexplained situation, or you may even discover an answer to a question which has long been weighing on your mind.”

Inhaling, Madri Typhicus settled deeper into his chair. “Now . . . look into the Kohah for a few moments, then close your eyes and focus on the symbols you are holding.”

Rafe groaned and shifted in his chair. This was probably going to be useless, but if Madri Typhicus’ exercise was capable of giving him some insight into his problems, he was all for it. He’d love some insight on how to get home. He wiggled around in his chair until he was comfortable, looked in the Kohah, and closed his eyes. Now what? He slit one eye open and glanced around the room. Everyone seemed to be content to relax in their chairs with their eyes closed.

As if reading his mind, Typhicus spoke in a very deep, relaxed voice, “If you find your head is too full of thoughts to concentrate on the object in your hand, focus on your breathing until you are aware of nothing else except the rise and the fall of your chest. Then shift your focus to the object you are holding.”

Rafe muffled a sigh. He really couldn’t concentrate on anything. His thoughts were jumping all over the place. He thought about what he’d like to eat for lunch . . . then he wondered

what the angels in his Swordsmanship class would think of his new sword . . . then he thought about the paper he had due on menetekles, the strange octopus-like plant found in the Ring of Ashlot . . . it would take some time to investigate that plant and he'd have to go to the library . . . oh, and while he was in the library, he'd have to spend some time looking for anything pertaining to the dark spirit Vexxon.

Rafe wrinkled his nose. Celestial meditation was not going well. Finally, he did what the madri suggested and focused on his breathing. Gradually, his thoughts began to slow and he was able to visualize the vesica piscis in his hand . . . the almond-shaped area shared by two overlapping circles.

The Adomis Rocker Arena was the most enormous vesica piscis in Mystfira. Madri Fey said the arena had been placed where the two worlds of Mystfira and Baeldavar interlinked because whenever circles overlapped anywhere in the universe, a space was created where great power, love, strength, and intention could exist . . . power, love, strength, and intention . . . power, love, strength, and intention . . .

All at once, Rafe's eyes snapped open and he found himself staring into the Kohah. Objects swirled around inside it, veiled in an eerie mist . . . then the scene changed to the Tree of All Knowledge surrounded by darkness and barricaded by the burning hedge of Hell's Tongue. As Rafe watched, a smooth yellow object was hurled into the fiery border surrounding the tree, and the hedge flames flared orange as it was consumed. The scene changed again. Rafe saw a set of hands dripping with blood, spinning around the Kohah to the sound of malevolent laughter . . . then a low moan began, gaining intensity until it became an agonized wail. The evil laugh continued on and on until Rafe realized that he could no longer breathe. He could feel something

gripping his neck and choking him. He bolted upright, screaming and clawing at the force constricting his neck.

"Relax, buddy," said Blake, standing over his friend and looking bewildered. "I didn't mean to startle you. You sure are a sound sleeper. I can't believe you didn't wake up when the angels were called to the Valley of Shadows."

Rafe was relieved to see that Blake was the only other student in the room with him. He leaned forward, dropped his head into his hands, and forced himself to breathe.

Blake rested his hand on Rafe's shoulder. "Everyone vamoosed it out of here as soon as the wind summoned the angels. Halfway back to Cliff House, I realized you weren't with the Ryder-Knight students so I came back to find you. Are you feeling okay?"

"I think so," said Rafe, rubbing his face with his hands. "I can't believe I fell asleep."

"I'm glad I came back. I would have hated to miss you holering like a madman."

"I'm glad I could provide you with your entertainment for the day."

"What were you dreaming about?"

"I don't really know," said Rafe. "It was all jumbled up, but I remember feeling like trouble was coming."

Blake pulled Rafe to his feet. "Trouble *is* coming if we don't get back to Cliff House right now and stay put until the angels return from the valley. Keswick will be counting heads at the front door, and if Madri Typhicus finds out we aren't there . . . well . . . it won't be pretty, my friend."

Rafe glanced at the Kohah on the way out the door and made a mental note to never fall asleep during Celestial Meditation again.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Floral Rain



In the next few weeks, winter laid siege to Mystfira, distracting Rafe from any worries about the Kohah and Celestial Mediation. It had been hard for him to get used to the strange rains that fell in the heavens, but adjusting to the peculiar types of snow was even more difficult.

In addition to regular snow and ice storms, Mystfira had three other types of snow: foost, silch and glesh. Sometimes the storms lasted for days, but the snow varieties didn't stay on the ground long. Typically, all types of snow melted within four or five hours of the storm's end.

Rafe didn't mind the foost, or feather snow as it was sometimes called, because it was quite entertaining. When it snowed foost, there were always at least two to three feet of soft, white feathers to play in. The angelic students taught the Ryder-Knight students how to bag the foost in pillowcases and tap them into the air, where they floated. Rafe found out the hard way that the last student to catch their bag was chased and pummeled with the soft, feather-filled pillowcases.

No one cared for silch. Silch was a sticky, grainy substance, and when it collected on the ground, it was like walking through thick molasses syrup. Oliver had been silly enough to go out in a foot of silch and had been stuck outside the door in one spot until the silch had melted down to his ankles.

The worst storms, however, were the glesh storms, and

everyone in Mystfira despised them. Glesh could best be described as shards of slivered glass, and even angelic bodies were not immune to the effects of glesh. It was dangerous to be outside in a glesh storm, and, if at all possible, it was to be avoided.

The angelic students had been called to the Valley of Shadows once during a glesh storm and had returned to the palace in deplorable condition. They had so many gashes and lacerations that the angelic order of healing angels, the powers, had to be called from Araboth. The powers cleaned and tended to the angels' wounds for days.

As the weeks faded into one another, Rafe's hope of finding a way home began to crumble. Each day after classes, he and the twins met in the library to search for any tidbit they could find on Vexxon and to look for any possible way to get back to Earth. The search was always frustrating, fruitless, and exhausting.

Gradually, the bleakness of winter gave way to spring, and Rafe noticed a change in the demeanor of the angels and the creatures conducting businesses in Truvian. The angels and villagers looked for any excuse to go outside, sniff the air, and gaze into the sky. The fairies painted their wings with garish colors and insisted on flying backwards, while the leprechauns collected old shoes from the villagers and mended them free of charge.

Thomas told the Ryder-Knight students that the inhabitants of Mystfira always waited with breathless anticipation for the floral rain. It only happened once a year, and its appearance also heralded the beginning of the Adomis season. The first Adomis trial was traditionally held four days after the floral rain fell.

Rafe had found a book in the library, *The Meteorology of Mystfira*, which said the flower blossoms would fall from the seventh heaven of Araboth sometime between March and April. Any flowers left on the ground would melt away a few hours

later, but any blossoms collected in a hand or a container would stay fresh for the next month. It was the custom of the jarvartans, angels, leprechauns, fairies, and even the gargoyles to weave the flowers into intricate necklaces and wreathes to wear to the Adomis arena.

Rafe and the twins anticipated the floral rain, too, but not for the same reason as the rest of Mystfira. They were waiting for their opportunity to sneak into the restricted section of the library, but they couldn't do that until the Adomis season began.

March turned to April, and still the floral rain had not arrived. One afternoon in mid-April, after yet another unproductive library search, Rafe and the twins were returning to the palace grounds via Dressage Street when they saw a tiny white flake wafting through the sky.

Baylor held out her hand to catch it. "It looks like a flower petal."

"Do you two smell that?" said Rafe, inhaling deeply.

The air smelled crisp and light, like it did on Earth after a cleansing spring rain, yet sweet and fragrant at the same time. Then, vivid blossoms of every imaginable color began to swirl from the heavens. Some of the flowers were tiny and others were much larger. Soon, the ground was spattered with exotic clusters.

Baylor picked up a handful of silky-smooth petals and buried her face in them. "This is incredible. It has to be the floral rain."

Blake whooped. "Do you know what this means? Just four days until the library is ours!"

The children watched in fascination as the fairies and gargoyles took to the sky, cavorting among the falling blossoms. The villagers poured out of their shops and homes along Dressage Street carrying baskets and containers of every shape and size

to collect the gorgeous flowers. The sound of music and singing filled the streets.

Baylor peeled off her jacket and stooped to fill it with flowers. "You guys need to fill your jackets, too. Poppe and Potts are coming over to my room right after the rain stops to show us how to make necklaces and wreaths. We'll tell them about our library plan while we string the flowers."

Rafe nodded. The three friends had decided it was best not to tell the fairies what their plans were until after the floral rain. Poppe and Potts loved secrets, but they weren't good at keeping them for any length of time.

With jackets slung over their backs like sacks, the children slogged back through the fragrant shin-deep blooms to Cliff House. As soon as the children entered Baylor's room, they heard a *tap, tap, tap* at the glass of the window and saw Poppe and Potts floating outside the second story holding their own little baskets of flowers.

Baylor opened the window, and the fairies fluttered into the room. Having noticed the open window, Simon swooped in behind them. He perched on the bottom railing of Baylor's bed and eyed the group. Baylor shooed him back out the window and closed it, while Poppe and Potts settled onto the bed amidst the magnificent blooms.

Poppe pulled strings and needles from her basket and gave one to each of them. "We all need to have a lacenecks or a wreath for Misdoad."

"That's right," said Potts, nodding his head. "We all need to have a necklace and wreath for Adomis."

"The twins and I don't want to go Adomis," said Rafe, watching Potts thread a needle. "We want to go to the library and we need your help."

“Kayo,” said Poppe. “We will help you.”

“This is our plan. Baylor will go to the library early in the morning on the day of the Adomis match. She will enter a book in the angelic fiction section of the library. At some point, she’ll find a place to hide, and she’ll fall asleep in the book using one of your fairy spells. Then Blake and I will go to the library to look for her, and we’ll pretend to be upset that she’s fallen asleep in a book.”

Poppe frowned. “You do not want to go to Misdoia?”

Blake placed his hands on either side of Poppe’s cheeks and looked into her eyes. “Focus, Poppe, focus. We already said we didn’t want to go to Adomis. When the librarian goes into the book to rescue Baylor, Rafe and I will sneak into the restricted section of the library. We’ll get the information we want, and then we’ll go back and wait for the librarian to bring Baylor out of the book. After that, the three of us will come back to Cliff House where you and Potts will be waiting for us in Rafe’s room. You’ll summon the moonlight, and we’ll all ride over to the arena to watch the rest of the Adomis match.”

“Why my room?” asked Rafe with a puzzled expression.

Blake looked at Rafe like it should be obvious. “Duh . . . because you have a bathroom.”

“It is a good plan ceptex for two things,” replied Poppe, continuing to string her flowers.

“Yes, except for two things,” said Potts. “One, you forgot about the gargoyles. If you don’t come out of Cliff House to ride the moonlight over to the Rocker with the other students when they go, the gargoyles will send someone to check on you. Two, how do you plan on getting into the restricted section? You have to be one of the madrikim to enter that part of the library. You can’t sneak into it. You can touch the orange lamppost and ask to

go inside until you're blue in the face, but if you're a student, you cannot enter."

Rafe and Blake exchanged stymied looks. Those were two very large problems.

"Do not worry though," said Poppe, jumping off the bed. "I just thought of thernoa plan. Come with me, Potts."

Poppe opened Baylor's door and skipped into the hallway with her brother as the three friends gazed at each other in bewilderment.

In a few minutes, the children heard a knock on the door, and Baylor ran to open it. She gasped and backed away as another Baylor and Rafe entered the room.

"Don't be scared. It's only us," said Rafe's twin in a voice exactly like Rafe's. "Poppe and I shifted our shapes. We've been practicing. I wanted to change into Blake, but I haven't been able to do it yet. His shape is too hard for me."

Blake stared at the new Rafe and Baylor. "I don't know whether to be insulted or grateful."

"Anyway," continued Rafe's new double, "we'll give Rafe some fairy dust and teach him a spell so he can change into a madri to get into the restricted section of the library. On the night of the match, we'll ride the moonlight to the Rocker with Blake, and when no one is looking, we'll ride the moonlight back over here to get you two."

"Okay, okay, okay," said Rafe. "Shift yourselves back."

"Yeah, you two are really freaking me out," said Blake.

Potts chanted a rhyme, and the fairy versions of Rafe and Baylor began to shimmer and vibrate until Poppe and Potts were standing in front of the children again. They climbed up on Baylor's bed like nothing had happened and started stringing the flowers together again.

Baylor beckoned her brother and Rafe into a corner. "I think we should give their plan a try."

"We got grounded for six weeks and had to write a fifty page report the last time we decided to follow a fairy plan," whispered Blake.

"There's a good chance their plan will work this time," said Rafe.

"I agree," said Baylor.

"Of course you'd agree," moaned Blake. "I'm the one that has to babysit the fairies while you two have all the fun in the library."

"It's settled then," said Rafe with a nod.

"Good," called Potts from the bed. "We'll start your magic lessons tomorrow."



Chapter Twenty-Four

The Wisdom of the Wind

There were no classes scheduled on the day of the Adomis trial so most of the Ryder-Knight students spent the day in Truvian, including Rafe. By late afternoon, everyone had returned to Cliff House to prepare for the evening's festivities.

While the other students dressed to go to the arena, Rafe crept into the palace and slipped behind the tapestry leading to the leprechaun tunnel. He navigated through the serpentine tunnel and arrived at the library at precisely six o'clock, fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. With plenty of time to spare, Rafe sauntered to the red lamppost.

Placing his hand on the post he said, "Angelic fiction."

The scene around him changed and he found himself standing on the other side of the lamppost, looking at two open books in the angelic fiction section. He knew Baylor was in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, but he didn't know who was in *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling. When he approached *The Jungle Book* to investigate, Haven Guardian tripped out of it and fell into his arms.

"Oops," said Haven, righting herself. "Close book." The book closed, blowing Haven into Rafe's arms again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to fall for you . . . er . . . into you . . . Whatever. You know what I mean." Blushing, Haven scurried over the glass floor to the red lamppost. She placed her hand on it and said, "Exit."

Rafe checked his watch as Haven disappeared. It was time to

set their plan in motion. "Traditional library," he said with a clap of his hands.

Instantly, he found himself standing in the traditional section of the library where he saw Zane, the white-haired librarian, working at his usual madcap pace behind the library counter. Rafe seated himself at a table with a book and looked around. Only a few students remained in the library, and all of them stood at Zane's counter preparing to check out their books.

Pretending to be interested in his book, Rafe stroked the page with his thumb while the last few students trickled out of the library.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rafe saw Zane approaching the table with his blue eyes twitching. "Are you not going to Adomis, young man?"

"Yes, of course I'm going," replied Rafe. "I wouldn't miss it for anything. I'm waiting for my friend. What time is it?"

"It is six-fifteen."

Rafe pretended to look startled. "It can't be. She is never late."

"I assure you, it is most certainly six-fifteen."

Rafe pushed his jaw forward and feigned surprise. "My friend, Baylor, went to the angelic library earlier today to finish a book she'd been reading. You don't suppose she fell asleep in it, do you?"

Zane's body went rigid and his face turned a bright shade of red. "Come with me," he commanded.

Rafe followed Zane out a door and to the red lamppost. Entering the angelic fiction section of the library, Rafe found it exactly as he had left it. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was still the only book standing open on the library floor.

Zane stood in front of the book, both hands on his hips, and addressed it. "Who is in your book?"

"There is a girl by the name of Baylor Wingate in my pages.

She entered the book at ten this morning as the character of Becky Thatcher."

"Where is she now?"

"Let me check," replied the book. "I know she stopped consciously living the character in chapter thirty-one; however, I cannot locate her precisely. She appears to be at the end of the book in McDougal's cave, which is dark and full of many chambers."

Rafe was startled to hear the book tell Zane where to start looking for Baylor. He hadn't anticipated that. He wouldn't have as much time as he thought.

"You wait here. I'll be right back," said Zane. He stepped through the pages and into the book.

"I hope so. We need to get to the Rocker!" called Rafe.

As soon as Rafe was sure Zane was gone, he delved into his trouser pocket. Poppe and Potts had given him two grains of fairy dust. He broke one grain in half and pinched it over himself.

*"Fly me over this floor and barrier
To the teachers' restricted area."*

Rafe levitated and found himself soaring over dozens of lampposts at a dizzying speed. When he reached the orange lamppost in the far corner of the library, he dropped to the floor. So far, so good. The first spell went off without a hitch.

Rafe removed the remaining grain and a half of fairy dust from his trousers. He would only use a half-grain now, but Potts had told him not to let the other grain out of his sight once he reached the restricted section of the library.

Closing his eyes, Rafe squeezed the half-grain of fairy dust into a powder and sprinkled it on himself once again.

*"As I enter the restricted division
Make me look like Keva Dominion."*

Rafe felt a strange cool sensation enveloping him as his body began to grow and change. Fortunately, changing shape with a fairy spell didn't hurt. He opened his eyes and looked down at his body, puckering his face distastefully as he gazed at the two dainty shoes peeking out from beneath his beautiful turquoise gown.

Clutching the last grain of fairy dust in his hand, Rafe hobbled in the high heels over to the lamppost, turning each of his ankles several times before he got there. How did women walk in these blasted things anyway? As near as he could tell from the reflection in the shiny surface of the lamppost, he'd been successful. He looked identical to Madri Keva, right down to her high-heeled slippers.

He placed his hand on the lamppost and said, "Teachers' restricted library." His voice sounded just like Madri Keva's too, and Rafe instantly found himself standing in the teachers' restricted section of the library. He wasn't exactly sure what to do next, but he hoped the section functioned like angelic fiction where you could ask the book to copy pages for you to take home.

Rafe held his empty hand in the air as if he were about to receive something and said, "Madri Keva Dominion here."

"Welcome, Madri Keva Dominion," said a voice. "How may I help you today?"

"I would like information on the dark spirit named Vexxon. Which book has the most information?"

"That would be the book entitled *The Prophecies of the Light Keepers*. There are two paragraphs on page two hundred and seventeen. Would you like me to get the book for you?"

Rafe narrowed his eyes. Out of all the books in the restricted section of the library, the most anyone had written about Vexxon was two paragraphs? That was disappointing.

"The book will not be necessary. Please provide me with a

copy of those paragraphs,” said Rafe in his pretty new voice, continuing to hold out his hand.

“Of course, madri,” said the voice. Within a moment or two, the paper materialized in Rafe’s hand.

“Thank you.”

Rafe limped back to the lamppost in the madri’s tiny high heels, and exited the restricted section. There was no time to waste. If he didn’t want to be caught in the restricted section of the library, he would have to attempt a three-part spell. Poppe and Potts had advised against it, explaining that the timing of a three-part spell was very tricky.

Rafe agreed, a single spell would be best, but since the book had told Zane where to look for Baylor, he didn’t dare risk the time it would take to perform three separate spells. He had only practiced three-part spells a few times with the fairies. Potts had said the most important thing to remember about a three-part spell was . . . timing was everything. As soon as Rafe felt the magic beginning to work, he needed to chant the next section of the spell.

Taking a deep breath, Rafe closed his eyes and sprinkled his last grain of fairy dust over his head.

*“Let the magic wear itself thin
And change me to myself again.”*

Rafe felt a cool sensation and tingling begin in his toes, so he chanted the next part of the spell.

*“I say this now with real conviction
Take me back to angelic fiction.”*

The moment Rafe felt his body lifting off the ground, he chanted the final part of the spell.

*"Place me at the open book.
That is where I wish to look."*

When Rafe opened his eyes, he found himself standing in front of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. He couldn't believe it. He'd actually managed a three-part spell.

Leaning against the book, Rafe crossed his legs and waited for Zane. After a few moments, he noticed his feet pinching. Glancing downwards, he saw that he was still wearing Madri Keva's turquoise high-heeled slippers! Hearing rustling coming from the pages of the giant book, he tore the slippers from his feet, and jammed them inside his shirt, one under each armpit.

Zane stepped out of the book, half-carrying a groggy and dirt-smudged Baylor. "Your little friend fell asleep in a very inconspicuous place in McDougal's cave. She is quite lucky I found her at all."

"I'm sorry, Zane," mumbled Baylor.

Rafe slipped one arm around Baylor's waist and looped her other arm around his neck, holding it with his hand. "We have to hurry or we'll miss our ride to Adomis."

Zane stared at Rafe's bare feet in disgust. "Where are your shoes?"

"Oh . . . that . . . I was hoping you wouldn't notice. I just love the feel of the cool glass floor against my feet," replied Rafe, hanging his head in embarrassment.

"Take your friend and go home now. In the future, I expect to see shoes on your feet when you visit this library."

Rafe charged out of angelic fiction, dragging the staggering Baylor beside him.

By the time they reached the leprechaun tunnel, Baylor was

panting and gasping for air. "Can't . . . keep . . . going," she said, bending over and placing her hands on her knees.

"What is wrong with you?"

Baylor collapsed onto the bottom step of the stone staircase in the leprechaun tunnel. "I lost the other grain of fairy dust in McDougal's cave, so I can't say the spell to wake up."

"You rest. It will be quicker if I go get Poppe and Potts and bring them here to wake you up."

"Wait," said Baylor, leaning her head against the tunnel wall. "Did you get into the restricted section?"

"Yes, but just barely. Luckily, you found a good place to hide because that silly book told Zane exactly where to look for you. I was able to get two paragraphs from a book called *The Prophecies of the Light Keepers*. I'll read you what it says before I go. I haven't had a chance to look at it myself yet."

He pulled the paper from his pocket and smoothed it out with his palms.

"It has been disclosed to us that the dark spirit named Vexxon is considered the prince of Tumult and Tempests. He is responsible for all earthly chaos, mayhem, and confusion caused by the elements of wind, water, rain, thunder, and lightning. We see Vexxon has undertaken a quest and relentlessly prowls the universe seeking that which has been hidden from all.

"Vexxon has recently made an alliance with another dark spirit known as Eudamos. Eudamos is considered the prince of the dark spirits known as the Destroyers. It has been revealed to us these dark spirits wish to establish a kingdom on Earth to enslave all mankind."

Baylor yawned. "Well . . . it's more than we knew yesterday. It explains why Vexxon came after me using storms."

"Yes, but it still doesn't explain why he wanted to hurt you in the first place."

"Uh oh. Do you smell that?" asked Baylor, struggling to keep her eyes open.

Rafe sniffed the air. "No, I don't smell anything. Sweet dreams. I'll be back with Poppe and Potts in a jiff."

Baylor was sound asleep and snoring by the time Rafe finished his sentence. He rose from the step and broke into a run. He didn't slow his pace until he reached the butterfly conservatory in Cliff House. When he exited the conservatory, he quickened his pace again and jogged towards the spiral staircase in the grand foyer.

Leopold appeared in the hallway at the top of the stairs, barking.

"What's wrong, boy?" said Rafe, taking the stairs two at a time. "Are Poppe and Potts antagonizing you?"

Leopold raced down the hallway, stopping in front of Rafe's door and pawing the floor.

"Smells like rotten eggs. Are you doing that, Leo? That's nasty," said Rafe, wrinkling his nose and fanning the air. "I'm not letting you into my room. Not when you smell like that."

Rafe pushed the whining dog away from his door and backed into his room. Pulling the door closed behind him, he turned around. His jaw dropped, as he looked at the room in shocked disbelief. Sheet music from the piano littered his floor. All the drawers from his desk had been dumped and rummaged through, his swords had been knocked off the wall, and his bookshelf had been ravaged. Worst of all, Rafe's room reeked of cigarette smoke.

“What in the— Poppe? Potts? Where are you? Have you been smoking?”

Hearing muffled sounds coming from his bedroom, Rafe stalked to the door. Obviously, the fairies weren’t satisfied with wrecking one room. They were on to the next.

He thumped open his bedroom door and gaped in horror. Poppe and Potts had been bound and lashed to the headboard of his bed, their mouths gagged. Panicked, they strained against the ropes and tried to scream something at Rafe through their gags.

He dashed to the bedside to pull the gags from the fairies’ mouths, but he heard noises coming from the room he’d just left. Creeping to the door, Rafe stole a peek around it. Horrified, Rafe watched Rand hop out of his closet with his feet bound and his hands tied in front of him.

“Be right back,” he called to Poppe and Potts.

Rand dropped to the sofa and held out his legs to Rafe. “Untie my feet first. I can’t feel them anymore.”

Rafe knelt and released the bindings. “I’m assuming that whoever tied you up is the one who trashed my room, too.”

Rand nodded. “Vexxon was here.”

Rafe felt the point of a cold steel blade touch the back of his neck. “Correction . . . Vexxon *is* here,” rasped a deep voice. “Rise, Rafe Ryder.”

Rafe put his hands in the air and rose.

“Face me.”

Rafe turned around to confront a tall hooded figure holding a very large sword.

“Good. You and your friend sit on the couch.”

As Rafe sank onto the sofa, Rand muttered, “Sorry, Rafe. I heard Poppe and Potts in your room calling for help. When I came in to see what was going on, I found him.”

“Silence!” shouted Vexxon, lowering his hood.

Cold black eyes bored into Rafe as he looked at Vexxon’s pockmarked face and jagged jaw, but other than Vexxon’s ugliness and hulking muscular body, the dark spirit appeared shockingly normal.

“You look surprised, Mr. Ryder. Were you expecting horns or a tail? Maybe some sharp gnashing teeth?”

Rafe returned Vexxon’s icy stare. “I don’t think they’re necessary. You’re plenty horrid just the way you are.”

Vexxon pulled Rand onto his feet and placed him in a chokehold. “You have something I want, and you will give it to me, or I will hurt your little friends, starting with this one here.”

As Rand thrashed against Vexxon, his shirt lifted up, and Rafe saw a large red V staring back at him from Rand’s abdomen.

“He means it, Rafe. He said he’s marked me for death,” cried Rand. “Please give him what he wants.”

“Don’t worry. Vexxon can’t hurt you in this house. It’s protected by the Blue Star,” said Rafe.

“I have no intention of hurting them here,” said Vexxon, his voice dripping with hostility. “I’m taking them to the Tree of All Knowledge where they will meet their end, unless you give me what I want.”

“If I have it, I’ll give it to you. What do you want?” said Rafe.

“You have it,” said Vexxon, relaxing his hold on Rand’s neck. “I want the page that was torn from the Fairy Grimoire.”

“I don’t have a Fairy Grimoire, and I didn’t rip anything out of one, either.”

“It’s the paper that the Hammer of Justice was wrapped in,” said Rand as Vexxon tightened his grip around his neck again.

“Okay, okay, okay,” said Rafe, rising from the sofa. “Let’s say

I do know where to find the paper. What's my guarantee that you won't hurt anyone after you get it?"

"Is it in this house?"

"No, it's in one of the classrooms in the palace," said Rafe, hoping he was lying convincingly. "I can bring the paper back to you, but I won't do it unless you let everyone go first."

"Ha," scoffed the dark spirit. "Do you think I'm stupid? As a sign of good faith, I will let the fairy girl go free, but I'm taking your friend and the other little fairy brat with me. You," he said pointing to Rafe. "Go untie the male fairy from the bed. Leave his hands bound and his mouth gagged."

Rafe disappeared into the bedroom and returned with a trembling Potts a few minutes later.

"I will be waiting beneath the Tree of All Knowledge. Bring me the missing page from the Fairy Grimoire, and I will release them. You have my word."

"The word of a dark spirit? I don't find that reassuring," Rafe said.

"You have fifteen minutes."

"I'll need longer than that."

"That's all the time you're getting," said Vexxon, keeping his chokehold on Rand and picking Potts up by the seat of his pants. "After you get the page, the fairy girl can summon the moonlight, and you can ride it to the tree in under a minute."

Small puffs of smoke emanated from Vexxon's body and grew into a whirling vortex of black smoke, surrounding Rand and Potts. With a loud pop all three disappeared along with Vexxon.

Rafe located his sword and scabbard, and pulled it into place on his back. Then he hurried to the bedroom to untie Poppe. "It's okay," he said, wiping a tear from her cheek. "You can trust me. I'm going to get your brother safely back to you."

Retrieving his mother's puzzle box from the corner of his room where it had been hurled, he sat on the bed next to a weeping Poppe. He pressed a secret spot on the puzzle box, allowing him to break it into smaller pieces, and began to disassemble it.

"In a few minutes, I'll need you to summon the moonlight for me. Can you do that?"

Poppe nodded and her lower lip trembled. "Where is Lorbay? Is she safe?"

"Yes, she's asleep in the leprechaun tunnel that goes to the library. You need to get her and wake her up. Then you take her back to the Rocker and, when you get there, you find Madri Fey and tell her what happened. I'm going to save your brother and Rand. Do you understand me?"

Poppe nodded again.

"Good," said Rafe,

"Why does Xonvex think you have a page from the Ryfair Moiregri?" squeaked Poppe.

"Vexxon thinks I have a page from the Fairy Grimoire . . . because I do. I found it in the xant cave. It was wrapped around the handle of the Hammer of Justice, but I didn't know it was from the Grimoire until a few minutes ago," replied Rafe. He tapped a spot on one of the smaller boxes and a hidden compartment opened, allowing him to pull out the paper he had folded and tucked into it.

"Then why did you hide it?"

"I don't know," said Rafe.

Except, he *did* know why. The night he found out Rand had sold the Hammer of Justice to Vexxon, he'd hidden the paper in his mother's puzzle box. He'd figured if the paper was in the xant cave with the hammer, it *must* be important. He'd stashed the paper in the puzzle box for one reason only—because of

the dream he'd had on his first night in Mystfira when his mother and Luke had told him to use the box to keep his "secrets" safe.

Rafe unfolded the page and ripped the last two squares from the paper. He handed the scrap of paper to Poppe.

"You need shoes," said Poppe.

He shook his head and picked through the chaos on his bedroom floor until he found a pair.

"I need to stall Vexxon long enough for you to bring help. Madri Fey will know you're telling the truth the minute she sees a piece of the Fairy Grimoire," said Rafe, tying his shoes.

With a determined look on his face, Rafe trudged out of his room and towards the front door of Cliff House. Poppe bounced off the bed and followed him, scowling.

"Call the moonlight for me now," said Rafe, opening the door. "Make sure none of the gargoyles can see me leave."

Poppe pulled a tiny wand from her pocket. Squeezing her eyes shut, she concentrated and, soon, the crystal on the tip of it began to glow. A yellow tile of light appeared at Rafe's feet and he stepped onto it as Poppe chanted.

*"On the moon, Rafe will ride.
And in its light, he will hide."*

A strong wind began to blow as Rafe waited for the moonbeam to move, but it did not.

"Why isn't the moonlight moving, Poppe?"

"It is not me. It is the Rotpar Wind that is pingstop you."

Rafe shouted into the wind, "Let me go right now! Do you hear me? I said now!"

"Dark—ark—ark spirit—it—it. Danger—ger—ger liar—ar—ar. Danger—ger—ger real—al—al."

"Am I the only one who knows what's what around here?" screamed Rafe. "Let me go!"

"Not what—at—at. Whooooooooo," blew the wind, nearly knocking Rafe from the tile. "Danger—ger—ger. Real—al—al. Danger—ger—ger Liar—ar—ar."

Rafe straightened and the truth cut through him like a razor-sharp knife. The wind had been trying to tell him something very important from the get-go. He'd been such a fool. The Parrot Wind frequently mixed up the letters of the children's names. It had been attempting to say Gerand Rial's name since the minute they met.

Several months ago, Rafe had guessed the wind was saying Gerand's name to him over and over again, but Rand had convinced Rafe the wind had difficulty telling them apart and poor, stupid, deluded Rafe Ryder had believed him, even after Luke sent a note saying to listen to the wisdom of the wind.

It was so obvious now. Vexxon hadn't marked Rand for death. Gerand Rial was marked because he was a dark spirit who served Vexxon.

Rafe clenched his jaw and grabbed his hair in aggravation. "You've been trying to tell me Rand is a dark spirit all along, haven't you?" he screamed into the wind.

"Yes—yes—yes," hissed the wind.

"I understand!" shouted Rafe. "Now let me go!"

The wind released the tile and whooshed away.

As the moonbeam began to ascend, Leopold leapt onto it, landing beside Rafe with a thud.

"What are you doing? You didn't like this the last time," said Rafe, bending over to steady the dog. "Well, it's too late for you to go back now. You're in the soup with me."



Chapter Twenty-Five

Vexxon

The silver beam of moonlight shot through the heavens, reaching the Ring of Rocks in a matter of moments. Sitting high on the rocky ledge, the fiendish flames of Hell's Tongue licked the night sky, shrouding the Tree of All Knowledge in a sinister raspberry-orange glow. Even from Rafe's elevated position, the air felt suffocatingly hot, and the stench left a horrid metallic taste in his mouth.

All at once, the tile of moonlight accelerated and plunged towards the cliff where it slammed into the ground, catapulting Rafe and Leopold towards the blazing hedge. Hitting the dirt, they somersaulted, head over heels, coming to rest mere inches away from the fire. With his breath bursting in and out, Rafe scrambled backward like a crab, and Leopold hightailed it into the darkness, whimpering.

Within the circle Rafe could see a beleaguered Potts leaning against a large stone well, still bound and gagged, while Rand paced in front of it.

"Thank heavens, you're here," cried Rand. "Did you bring the page from the Fairy Grimoire?"

Rafe glared at Rand through the flames. "Why would *you* thank the heavens for anything? Where's your friend Vexxon?"

"What's the matter with you? Vexxon is not my friend."

"My mistake," snapped Rafe. "Let me try again. Where's your *master*?"

Rand stepped closer to the flames and shook his bound wrists at Rafe. "Are you crazy? Do friends tie you up?"

"You can stop pretending now. I know who you are."

"I hope so," said Rand, licking his lips, "because I'm your friend and I'm in real trouble here."

"Save it, Gerand! You were off my friend list the second I found out you were a dark spirit."

Rand's mouth contorted into a twisted grin as the ropes fell away from his wrists. "I'm surprised it took you this long to figure it out. The Parrot Wind is such a blabbermouth."

"Let Potts go. The little fellow has got nothing to do with this."

"Where's the page from the Fairy Grimoire? Show it to me." Rand pulled a dagger from his belt and stalked towards Potts. "I can cut your little fairy friend loose, or I can—"

"I have it. Don't hurt him!" cried Rafe, digging into his pocket and holding the page above his head. "We'll make a fair trade. You bring Potts outside the hedge to me and I'll give you the page from the Fairy Grimoire."

The little fairy shuddered and shrank against the well as Rand crouched at his side and held the dagger next to his neck.

"I have what you want. Let him go!" Rafe pulled the paper from his pocket and flapped it above his head. Without warning, the page ripped from his hand and he whirled to see Vexxon towering over him.

"Humans are such simple creatures. As you can see, you're not in control of what happens here. I am," said the dark spirit.

Rafe gulped, heart throbbing in his chest as he watched the dark spirit gloat. Curling his lips into a sneer, Vexxon stomped past Rafe and straight into the flaming hedge of Hell's Tongue and emerged on the other side without so much as a single scorched hair.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Vexxon handed the page from the Fairy Grimoire to Rand. "With the Hammer of Justice, hit the covering of the well in the ten spots indicated. Then draw the water from the well and give it to me."

Rand belted his dagger and examined the sheet Vexxon had given him. "Master, the cover to the well is divided into twelve gridded squares and there are only ten squares on this paper, not twelve."

"How many squares are marked with a circle?" asked Vexxon. "We only need ten."

"There are nine squares marked with a circle. The tenth one is missing, so I don't know which square to hit on the last stroke."

"Strike the nine spots indicated by the Fairy Grimoire, and each time you come to the tenth possibility, hit one of the two squares left on the cover of the well. Sooner or later, the well will open. It is only a matter of time. Begin now."

Rand positioned himself behind the well and struck the first blow. Each stroke on the well's cover produced a deep resonating tone with a slightly different pitch, like a tympani drum.

A bead of sweat formed on Rafe's upper lip as Rand walloped away. Vexxon was right, eventually Rand would hit the right combination and the Well of Wisdom would open. He had to delay the dark spirits until Poppe got help. He tried to formulate a plan, but a rustling noise from behind him startled him, derailing his train of thought. Whirling on his heels, Rafe saw Leopold trot out of the darkness, carrying Poppe on his back with Baylor's red-tailed hawk riding on her tiny shoulder.

"Have you lost your mind, Poppe?" Rafe whispered. "You were supposed to be getting help."

"Shhh," said the fairy, jumping off Leopold's back. "Poppe is

getting help. It's me . . . it's Baylor. Poppe went to get Madri Fey, and I came to help you free Potts. I knew I smelled trouble when you left me in the tunnel."

With fingers splayed out, Rafe clutched his hand to his chest and gulped. The little fairy by his side was not getting her two syllable words mixed up. It had to be Baylor. This was not good . . . not good at all.

"Say something," whispered Baylor.

"Quiet. I'm thinking," he said. Furrowing his brow, Rafe played through a few quick scenarios in his mind before he decided on a course of action. "Do you see those boulders over there? There's a type of moss growing on them called Demon's Bane. Go scrape off as much as you can and bring it back here."

"Okay," said Baylor. She brushed the hawk from her shoulder and ran towards the boulders.

Vexxon threw back his head and laughed, a malevolent, guttural laugh, as the sound of steady drumbeats punched through the air. Every note felt like a personal insult to Rafe.

"What is it they say about counting your chickens before they're hatched? You haven't won yet!" Rafe shouted at the dark spirit.

"There is nothing that you or your little fairy friends can do to stop me."

"That's more than likely true, but at least tell me why you're doing this," replied Rafe.

"It's very simple. I'm on a quest," said Vexxon, drumming the end of his fingers together. "When I fulfill my mission, I will be rewarded with my heart's desire."

"Which is what?"

"I desire to rule your Earth, and it will be my reward for taking the fruit of this tree to my leader."

"But why did you take time away from your precious quest to hurt Baylor?" asked Rafe. "What does any of this have to do with her?"

Vexxon's cold flint eyes clouded with disgust and rage. "That girl . . . that vile little wench, needed to be disposed of. She was capable of changing my future," spat Vexxon. "A dark seer in Baeldavar told me unless I changed the course of future events, my quest to rule Earth would be ended by one Baylor Orion Wingate. However, it seems I've changed events just enough to complete my objective."

Rand struck one last sonorous blow. To Rafe's horror, the cover to the well shivered and faded away.

"It is done!" shrieked Rand.

"Draw the water," said Vexxon, turning his back on Rafe.

"I'm trying, master," said Rand as he tinkered with the crank mechanism of the well. Rusty from years of disuse, the handle refused to budge, but Rand's clumsy tampering loosened it. To Rafe's dismay, the handle began to crank, and the golden bucket suspended above the well inched down towards the water.

Baylor jogged back to Rafe's side with the Demon's Bane cradled inside of one of Leopold's scarves. "So what's the plan? I heard what he said, and, clearly, I'm supposed to help you stop him."

"Are you able to use Poppe's wings to fly?"

Baylor nodded. "Yes. I flew here from the palace."

"I need to get inside that flaming hedge," whispered Rafe. "When I did my report on the Ring of Rocks, I remember reading that Demon's Bane mixed with angel's spit will permanently quench the flame of Hell's Tongue."

"Good to know, but in case you haven't noticed . . . there are no angels here."

"Maybe not, but we *do* have a fairy. The spittle of a fairy

mixed with Demon's Bane will temporarily extinguish the fire of Demon's Tongue."

"You have got to be kidding," she whispered in disgust.

"When we get through the hedge of Hell's Tongue, you fly straight into that tree. The fruit will appear some place on the tree's trunk, and you have to get it before Vexxon does. Then you fly away from this place as fast as Poppe's wings can carry you. I'll try to keep Vexxon and Rand busy until help arrives. Start spitting."

Baylor smacked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "Poppe's mouth is too dry."

"Then think about a great big sour pickle and spit like this," said Rafe, puckering his mouth and spitting a big wad into the moss in the scarf.

Baylor wrinkled her face and gave Rafe a repugnant look. "Ew."

"Do it."

Baylor spat delicately into the pile of moss as Rand cranked the bucket, filled to overflowing, to the surface of the well. Unable to contain his excitement, Vexxon pushed Rand out of the way, dipped the silver chalice into the bucket, and carried it to the base of the tree.

"Get ready. We go on three," said Rafe. "One . . . two . . . three." He leapt to his feet and scattered the scarf of Demon's Bane onto the burning hedge. The smoldering flames consumed the moss; the flames subsided and died.

Baylor flew to the tree and Rafe pulled the sword from the scabbard on his back. He charged towards Vexxon, who was pouring the water from the chalice over the roots of the tree. Just as Rafe reached the dark spirit, Vexxon walked sideways up the tree trunk with a smug smile, defying gravity.

Rafe watched as Baylor spotted something smooth and

yellow sprouting from the tree's trunk and fluttered onto the branch beside it. It was only about the size of a pineapple, not very big at all compared to the size of the colossal tree. Baylor yanked, but Poppe's little fairy arms didn't have much strength, and it clung stubbornly to the bark.

Vexxon saw the fairy pulling at the fruit and doubled his pace up the trunk.

"He's coming!" bellowed Rafe. "He's right behind you!"

Baylor flinched as she saw the dark spirit approaching, and with one last titanic tug, she plucked the fruit from the tree, but before she could fly off the branch, Vexxon caught her, twisting and tearing one of Poppe's beautiful little wings until it was rendered useless.

"Kee-eeeeee-an!" Simon screeched out of the sky and clawed at Vexxon's head, while Baylor slipped further out onto the branch, clenching the fruit to her chest.

Vexxon swung at the hawk with both hands, and after several fierce blows Simon retreated. The dark spirit leered at Baylor. "Give me the fruit and I will spare your life."

"Never," she cried. "You'll have to kill me to get it."

"Baylor, no!" screamed Rafe. "Give it to him!"

"What is this trickery?" said the dark spirit, glowering at Baylor.

Flaring his nostrils and cracking his neck from side to side, Vexxon chanted something in an unfamiliar language until Poppe's body shimmered, wavered and faded away with a pop and Baylor appeared in her human form once again.

"So it is you," said the dark spirit. "Things will not end well for you today."

"Master! Take the fruit and call your tempests to finish them!" called Rand.

"I cannot. That will alert the angels, and they would be here before we could leave."

As Vexxon skulked towards her, Baylor clung to the fruit, backing further and further out on the tree branch, until the branch became nothing more than a wooden tightrope, sagging precariously under her.

"There may be nothing that I can do to save my own life, but I can save the world from you, Vexxon." With hands trembling, Baylor closed her eyes and held the fruit over her head. "Simon! Take it!" she screamed.

Vexxon lunged and the additional weight on the small bough tasked it to the breaking point. Crackling, the limb snapped in half, and Baylor plummeted downward, still holding the fruit in her hands.

Plunging out of the sky at breath-taking speed, Simon tucked his wings and dropped straight into a headfirst dive towards Baylor. Unfurling his wings and flinging his feet forward as he caught up to her, the red-tailed hawk attempted to seize the girl with his talons as the two of them disappeared over the cliff and out of sight. Even if Simon managed to catch Baylor, Rafe knew the hawk could never support Baylor's weight and fly at the same time. Simon would crash to the ground with her.

Muscles quivering in rage, Rafe pounded his fist on the tree trunk. "Come down here, Vexxon! You coward!" he screamed.

Vexxon paid no attention to Rafe. His eyes were fixed on something over the ledge.

A faint brushing sound rose from beneath the cliff and swelled to a loud pulse of strong wings whipping against the wind. An angel with gorgeous white wings tipped in silver, and clad in a red and brown battle skirt, rose from beneath the cliff holding Baylor in his strong, muscular arms. Two sheathed

swords crisscrossed his back with their hilts peeking above his shoulder blades. It was Sion!

The angel set Baylor, still clutching her piece of fruit, down on the ledge outside the burning hedge while Vexxon roared in outrage.

"Master, the girl has an animal guardian!" shouted Rand.

Vexxon seethed. "So it would seem."

Sion drew one of the swords from his back, and it burst into flames. He lifted off from the ground and launched himself towards Vexxon.

"Uh, uh, uh . . . you're breaking the rules," said Vexxon. "Animal guardians aren't allowed to use their angelic forms to rescue their charges."

Sion landed on the tree branch behind Vexxon. "I'm not allowed to use my angelic form on Earth, but, thanks to you, we're no longer *on* Earth, are we?"

"How very astute of you," replied Vexxon. Two large dark wings, tipped with flames, emerged from Vexxon's back; he was holding a flaming sword, too.

"This is almost laughable. An animal guardian cannot defeat me," said Vexxon, striking at Sion with his sword.

Sion parried his blow. "Never underestimate an angel protecting his charge."

Rafe, absorbed in the conflict unfolding above him, suddenly felt his own sword being wrenched from his hand. Twisting around in surprise, Rafe saw Rand shrinking away with Rafe's sword tucked behind his back.

"I guess it comes down to you and me, and I've seen you with this sword. I'm not keen to have it used on me," said Rand, backing up to the Well of Wisdom and dropping Rafe's sword over the side. Drawing a dagger from his belt, Rand pointed it at Rafe.

“No! Please, Rand!” shouted Baylor from outside the circle. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I’m a dark spirit,” said Rand. “I don’t have a choice. Bring me the fruit, Baylor. Please . . . or . . . or the little fairy is going get it.”

Hearing Rand’s threat, the color drained from Potts’ face. His breath burst in and out through his nose and he whimpered through his gag.

“No, Rand! You’re wrong. You *do* have a choice,” said Baylor, tears glistening in her eyes. “Everybody has a choice. Do you hear me? Everyone. Don’t do this!”

“I am what I am. There are no choices for me,” said Rand.

From the corner of his eye, Rafe saw Potts curl into a ball and roll out of the hedge through the little gap that Baylor and he had created. As Potts disappeared into the darkness, the edges of Rafe’s lip curled, and a smile began to play on his lips.

“It seems you’ve lost your only leverage. Now all you have is me, so you’ll have to pick on someone your own size for a change,” said Rafe.

Rand dropped his eyes to the ground, searching for his hostage. “Aauurrghhh!” he cried, charging at Rafe with his dagger.

Out of the darkness, Leopold flew towards the boys, hind-quarters flying. Knocking Rafe to the ground and clamping his jaw tightly around Rand’s thigh, the dog pulled Rand away from Rafe. Howling in pain, Rand lifted his dagger, and plunged it into Leopold’s side. The dog stumbled a few steps away and collapsed on the ground.

Baylor let out a bloodcurdling scream and bolted through the opening in the hedge to Leopold’s side. Moaning, she dropped the fruit and sank to her knees next her pet.

Rafe struggled to his feet. “Is he okay?” he asked, starting towards them.

Before Rafe could take a single step, Rand grabbed him from behind and wrested him to the ground, face-first. Struggling, Rafe tried to roll out of Rand's grip, but he couldn't because Rand's arms were clamped around his belly like a boa constrictor.

Extremities shaking, Baylor pushed herself to her feet and pounced on Rand's back. "Get off him!"

Reaching behind him, Rand flipped Baylor over his head as if she were a ragdoll, and she landed hard on her back.

"Stay down," Rand said. "I don't want to hurt you, Baylor . . . I really don't."

"Oh, but you've got no problem hurting my dog!" she shouted.

"He bit me," spat Rand, picking up the fruit and placing it under his arm. "Let us take this, and we'll leave you in peace."

"Never," said Rafe, lunging for Rand's knees and bringing him to the ground.

The boys grappled furiously with each other, but Rafe soon found himself on his back with Rand straddling his middle.

"Why are you making me do this? I didn't want to hurt you," said Rand, placing his hands around Rafe's neck.

Rafe tilted his head to the side, and as his world went hazy, he saw Baylor roll onto her hands and knees and crawl towards the fruit. Rand noticed her, too.

"Don't touch it," Rand shrieked, releasing his grip on Rafe and running after the girl.

Baylor grabbed the fruit from the ground and stood to face Rand, but before he could reach her, she hurled the fruit into the flames where it incinerated with a loud sizzle.

"What have you done?" shouted Rand.

Lying on his back and gasping for breath, Rafe couldn't believe what he'd just witnessed. She had thrown away their chance to get home, and his father's miracle.

The ground beneath the children began to vibrate with a myriad of running feet, and the *whomp-whomp* of gargoyles' wings pierced the air.

With a guttural roar, Vexxon ceased to battle with Sion and transformed himself into a thick pillar of black smoke. "You brats have sealed your fate!" he shouted, billowing out of the tree towards Rafe and Baylor.

Desperate to protect them, Sion leapt off the tree branch and dove into the plume of black smoke. He reached the children first and spread his great wings over them, shielding them both from Vexxon's wrath. Peeking out from a gap in Sion's feathers, Rafe saw the swirling smoke twist around Rand's body instead. It spun at a terrible velocity, and with a terrible sucking sound, Vexxon and Rand both vanished.

Sion lifted his wings, and Baylor scuttled out to Leopold's side where she let out an agonized wail. Her hands dripped red as she tried to quell the flow of blood from Leopold's wounds.

"Sion, can you heal him? Please," she pleaded.

"I cannot, but you can," replied the angel, kneeling beside her.

"I can't heal wounds like this!"

"Your power is greater now because of the xant. Just keep him alive until we can get him to Madri Ezekiel."

Baylor nodded in silence. She pressed her palms together with her fingertips stretched skyward. Closing her eyes and drawing her hands to her lips, she rocked back and forth and exhaled into them. Then she pressed them over Leopold's wound, and they begin to glow golden yellow.

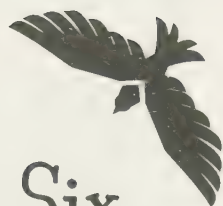
Rafe stared at Baylor in shock. Who was this girl? How was she able to heal wounds like this? Did Blake know about this?

Rafe's mind swam with still more questions as Keswick and

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another gargoyle thudded to the ground next to him. Lifting his eyes, Rafe saw a legion of gargoyles hovering nearby, as well as an army of leprechauns in full battle gear standing at attention outside the burning hedge of Hell's Tongue.

Rafe looked back at Leopold just in time to see Baylor's body go limp and slump against Sion, who scooped her into his arms and took to the sky. Keswick lifted Leopold as tenderly as he could, while the other gargoyle slipped a stony hand around Rafe's waist and whisked him into the air, too.



Chapter Twenty-Six

Revelations

Madri Ezekiel and Thomas stood at the door of Cliff House, awaiting the children's arrival. When the group landed, Keswick handed the wounded dog to Madri Ezekiel, while Sion carried Baylor into the mansion. Rafe's legs felt a bit rubbery, but he insisted on walking into the building on his own two legs.

"Were you injured?" asked Thomas.

"A few scrapes, nothing major," replied Rafe, unable to take his eyes off Baylor and Leopold.

He followed Madri Ezekiel and Sion up the spiral staircase to Baylor's room, but when he tried to slip into the room behind the others, Thomas stopped him. "You can help by waiting in your room and giving us space to work on your friends. Please, do not worry. Madri Ezekiel is the best healer we have in the heavens."

Rafe opened his mouth to protest, but the door slapped shut in his face. Shoulders slouched, he dragged himself back to his room and sagged onto the sofa.

"Thank the heavens, you're safe," said Madri Fey in a cheery voice as she materialized in his doorway. "I didn't know if I could rouse the troops in time . . . especially at the end of an Adomis match."

"Do you know how Baylor and Leopold are doing?" asked Rafe. "They told me to wait here."

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"No, my dear. I do not." Madri Fey's wings fluttered as she surveyed the deplorable condition of his room. "My goodness. What a mess you have on your hands. Poppe and Potts told me what happened. Why don't I tidy your room while you wash up? Then we'll go check on Baylor and Leopold together."

Rafe smiled gratefully. His adrenaline had worn off and his muscles were beginning to throb. He located some clean clothes in the tangle of drawers on the floor and shut himself into his bathroom. Some of the pain in his aching muscles subsided under the hot stream of water in the shower. He was exhausted, but he knew he wouldn't be able to shut his eyes until he was sure that Baylor and Leopold were all right.

Dressing, Rafe stepped out of the bathroom, tousling his wet hair with a towel. He lifted his head, expecting to see Madri Fey. Instead, he found Madri Typhicus sitting on his sofa.

"Hello, Rafe. I asked Madri Fey to give us a few minutes alone," said the madri. "First, you'll be relieved to know that Baylor and Leopold will make a full recovery. Second, I've just returned from the seventh heaven. The Well of Wisdom has been moved to Araboth where no one will ever be able to access its waters again. The Tree of All Knowledge will remain here in the Ring of Rocks, as it poses no threat without the well. As I think you've discovered tonight, knowledge without wisdom is a very dangerous thing. The dark spirits have never been able to grasp that fact, but you'll learn the difference between knowledge and wisdom in my Divine Wisdom class next semester."

Rafe felt his face color with guilt. He would have been happy to have knowledge without wisdom if it meant he could get back to Earth and save his dad.

Madri Typhicus studied the look on Rafe's face. "Knowledge can be taught, or at least attained, but wisdom must be developed

over time through a process of questions, explorations, and experiences. The key to wisdom is an open mind. Dark spirits see only their point-of-view, so they will never truly be wise.”

Rafe shifted. Maybe he’d never be truly wise either. He’d gone to the tree with a closed mind, and if Baylor hadn’t been with him, things would have ended very differently. Rafe would not have acted as honorably as she did. If he’d gotten his hands on the fruit tonight, he would have eaten it instead of destroying it.

“Have a seat,” said Typhicus, patting the sofa cushion next to him. “I have something else to discuss with you. I realize it has been several months since your unit on guardian angels, but do you remember what you learned in Madri Estel’s class about aware and unaware angels?”

Thoroughly confused, Rafe sat. After all that he’d been through this evening, the madri wanted to talk about classes? “Not all of it, but some of it,” said Rafe, slumping against the back of the sofa. “Although, I certainly don’t remember being told guardians can be sent to Earth in animal form.”

“Ah, yes. That was a fact that Madri Estel only shared with the angelic students. We would have preferred returning our human students to Earth without that knowledge,” said the madri. “I’m sure it’s apparent to you by now . . . the red-tailed hawk, Simon, is in actuality Baylor’s animal guardian, Sion.”

“And Leopold? Is he a guardian as well?”

“No, Leopold is only a pet, but from what I’ve heard, he acted as brave as any angel this evening. I don’t really have time to go into who gets which type of guardian, Rafe. Right now, it’s only necessary for you to know that it’s complicated, which brings me back to the point I’ve been trying to make,” said Typhicus, putting an arm on the back of the sofa and leaning towards him.

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"There's no easy way to say it, so I'll just come right out with it. On Earth, you are an unaware guardian angel."

Rafe covered his mouth with the back of his hand to suppress a laugh, but a loud guffaw escaped his lips anyway. "Is this your idea of a joke? If you told me Baylor is an unaware angel, or a jarvartan, I *might* believe you. She healed my hand once, and come to think of it . . . she probably healed her own arm after she was bitten by that hellhound."

Madri Typhicus scowled. "I don't know anything about Baylor being bitten by a hellhound, and we'll discuss that later . . . in great length . . . but Baylor is neither jarvartan, nor angel. She's a human being,"

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. Did you know she can actually smell trouble?"

"I am one hundred percent certain Baylor is human, although she does seem to have one foot in the ethereal world. I believe she possesses certain rare abilities that the xant is enhancing. I understand that she's not well liked by the other Ryder-Knight students, and I find that unfortunate. Too often, humans are afraid of what they themselves cannot do or don't understand . . . but we're getting sidetracked. That's not what I came to talk to you about."

Rafe crossed his arms and glared at the madri. "There is no way I'm an angel. I have human parents."

"I assure you, I am telling you the truth," replied the madri. "If you remember your Angelology unit, unaware guardian angels enter the earthly realm by being born into it. Make no mistake. You *are* a guardian."

"Impossible," snapped Rafe.

"I know it's hard for you to take in, but—"

Rafe held his hands in front of him like a shield. "I said—it's impossible. If I were an angel, I'd know it."

"If you knew it, it would defeat the whole purpose of having unaware angels, but I understand. I had difficulty believing it at first, too. When you were able to see beyond what Madri Keva could see in the library, she came to me with her suspicion that you were one of our previous students. An angel's senses are superior to humans, and she suspected the xant dust was enhancing your eyesight. I knew Madri Keva was right when I watched you and Madri Isabo duel in the ballroom after you captured a xant. We've only had a handful of angelic students capable of defeating Isabo with any type of weapon."

Trying to calm himself, Rafe closed his eyes and pressed his fingertips to his temples, rubbing slow, steady circles. It couldn't be true, but why would Typhicus lie about something like this? He belonged with his parents and Lady Jane, not here with a bunch of creatures that were all barking mad.

"You are known in the heavens by the name Raphael Guardian," continued Typhicus. "You are one of the finest swordsmen Mystfira has ever trained, and the fairy xant you captured has made you even better. Haven't you ever wondered why you are only tested against the madrikim in your swordsmanship class and never against your fellow students?"

"No, not at all," said Rafe, "because the angelic students told me the instructors were trying to keep me from getting injured because they're not always in control of their swords."

"I can see you're going to need some convincing. Touch my scepter," said Typhicus, tilting the multi-colored crystal stone towards Rafe. "I can allow you to experience life as you once did for a few moments."

Rafe's hand trembled as he reached out to touch the twinkling tip. The instant his finger met the scepter, both profound darkness and pulsating white light surrounded him. Those two

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things couldn't exist together . . . it wasn't possible . . . yet they did, and Rafe felt strangely comforted by each. Love spun all around him and through him. The feeling was nothing short of sublime.

"What you are experiencing is the divine connection between Araboth and the angels," murmured the madri. "Now, fly."

Suddenly a pair of huge white wings tipped in silver sprouted from Rafe's back and he soared into the sky over rings of Mystfira. Flying felt as natural as walking, and it always had. How could he have forgotten?

As Rafe flew, he became aware of senses. He could feel things without having to touch them. His hearing was so sharp he could hear a pin drop on the desert sand in the Ring of Rocks, and he could see such incredible distances. Not only that, he could see *through* things if he desired. His sense of smell was even more superb, and he realized he had an uncanny knack for smelling out the smoky, sulfuric odor of demons. How was any of this possible?

Pulling his finger away from the scepter, Rafe gaped at Typhicus. It couldn't be true. Rafe was an ordinary kid with a messed up life, as of late, but that was all. He wasn't an angel.

"I want to go home," he whispered.

"Raphael . . . Rafe" said the madri. "You *are* home."

Dread seeped through Rafe's body as the truth melted into him, and his world shattered. Life as he knew it was over, but things made a strange kind of sense now. He realized he hadn't been dreaming when he saw things swirling in the Kohah. It had been real. His connection with the divine had allowed him a glimpse into the future.

"If I'm an unaware, then you shouldn't have told me, I wasn't

meant to know," said Rafe angrily. "You had no right to change everything for me."

"I would have preferred not to tell you, but I wasn't given a choice. I was commanded to tell you by the seventh heaven of Araboth."

Rafe pressed his lips together, fumbling his fingers in front of himself as he stared at the floor. "Are the others kids . . . are they human?"

"Yes, all of them, except for you and Gerand," said Typhicus.

"I could smell them," muttered Rafe. "I could smell the dark spirits when I touched your scepter. How come you didn't know what Rand was when we got here?"

"A dark spirit in an *unaware* form is difficult to smell, although they sometimes smell like stale cigarettes," replied the madri. "The odor is very faint, unless they come into contact with other dark spirits. Then it grows stronger."

"That's why my room smelled like someone had been smoking when I got here tonight. It would also explain why Rand smelled like cigarettes the day we went into Truvian. He said it was because he accidentally went into The Sneaky Snake."

"The smell of the demon food from The Sneaky Snake probably unconsciously attracted Rand. I'm sure he didn't know who he was when he arrived here, any more than you did," said Typhicus.

"But, if Rand was a dark spirit, how did he get into the fairy circle?" asked Rafe. "The guardians threw the other students into the circle, but dark spirits don't have guardians."

"Ah, yes. We believe Vexxon, or another dark spirit, impersonated a guardian and slipped Rand into the circle. Once Rand was in Mystfira, Vexxon was able to establish a connection with

him and begin to indoctrinate him. It was a very clever plan on Vexxon's part, and he almost succeeded."

"That explains why Luke was trying to warn me from Araboth. He sent me three messages . . . if you count the first warning in my grandmother's fortune cookie in Clifton Cove."

"I spoke to Luke when I was in Araboth tonight, and he said he only had two messages delivered to you. He asked a fairy child to deliver the first message to you in hopes of warning you about the dark spirits cloaked in the storms so you could help protect Baylor. Then he tricked a Woganot into slipping a note under your door here in Mystfira."

"Woganot?"

"A creature in charge of protecting the Mount of Mists," Typhicus said, waving his hand dismissively, "but the point is . . . Luke is adamant that he sent only two notes. The Parrot Wind admitted to delivering the third note to you, but it did not come from Luke."

"But it was Luke's handwriting. It *had* to be from him."

Madri Typhicus shook his head and shrugged. "Luke claims it was a forgery. He told me everything that he knew while I was in Araboth. He even admitted to contacting you in a dream the first night you were in Mystfira."

"That's right, he did. I heard Luke's voice telling me to hide my 'secrets' in my mother's puzzle box. That's why I hid the page from the Fairy Grimoire in the box."

"Luke had no way of knowing that you would obtain a page from the Fairy Grimoire and that wasn't the secret he was suggesting you hide in the puzzle box. He simply wanted you to hide the note that he sent to you in there so no one would find out what he'd done."

"Then who sent the note?"

"We're trying to establish that now, but none of us know who enlisted the help of the Parrot Wind to warn you about Gerand. The Parrot Wind is refusing to tell us," Typhicus said, "but I suspect it was a Wind Walker, otherwise the Parrot Wind would tell me."

Baffled, Rafe shook his head. "I don't understand. What is a Wind Walker?"

"Perhaps you've not covered that in any of your classes yet," said Madri Typhicus with a nod. "They're very interesting creatures who travel throughout all the galaxies and universes using the winds. There are several species of Wind Walkers, some as tiny as gnats and some as large as me, but I suspect it was a Wind Gypsy. They're loyal to two things. The winds they ride and the people who offer them kindness. It's possible you may have met one on Earth. They would appear like any other human until they're about to ride the wind, then they shimmer and fade into it . . . and once they're in the wind they are totally invisible."

"So you think a Wind Gypsy is responsible for the last note?"

"It's my best guess, since none of the winds will talk to me right now."

"All of the winds talk up here?" asked Rafe.

"All the winds talk *everywhere*. Here in the heavens, the Parrot Wind is the most conversive, and he attempts to communicate in every language he hears, but the other winds remain steadfast in their usage of Shoosh, which is the original language of the winds. It's a series of puffs, groans, sighs, whistles, and the occasional growl. You must have heard the winds on Earth before you came here. They speak Shoosh."

"Of course, I've heard winds before," said Rafe, "but I had no idea they had their own language."

"You knew all these things at one time, but going back to

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Earth as an unaware angel makes it necessary to wipe these things from your mind.”

“Since you just made me into an aware angel, do you mind telling me who I guard on Earth? I’m thinking it is my father, and, if that is the case, I need to get back to him.”

Typhicus stood and shook his head. “I do not know. It is known only to Araboth, but having that knowledge would defeat the whole purpose of being an unaware guardian angel. However, an hour ago, you were at the right place at the right time to save the seven heavens and your Earth. I think you should let that serve as enough of an answer for tonight. The heavens owe you a debt of gratitude.”

Rafe wrinkled his face in exasperation. “If the heavens owe me a debt of gratitude, they could start paying it by sending me home so I can do my job.”

“You know we can’t do that. I’ve told you it’s not presently possible and, for what it’s worth, I *am* sorry,” replied Typhicus. “I truly am.”

The madri pulled on the doorknob to leave, and Blake tripped into the room.

“Do come in, Mr. Wingate,” said the madri. “I think you’ll hear better in here than through that keyhole.”

“How about that Adomis trial tonight?” said Blake, avoiding the madri’s gaze. “Thirty-four miracles. Wowza!”

“Wowza, indeed.”

Blake shifted his weight and ran a nervous hand down his pant leg.

“Relax, Mr. Wingate,” said Typhicus, placing his hand on Blake’s shoulder. “You’ll be relieved to know that I’ve decided no one is to be punished.”

“All’s well that ends well. That’s what I always say,” said Blake.

“However,” said the madri, giving Blake’s shoulder a shake, “I will be sending the angels home on an extended break tomorrow so the Sakal can devote our entire attention to our human students . . . who are quite clearly crying out for *all* of our attention.”

Madri Typhicus winked at the wide-eyed boys and exited the room.

Rafe tilted his head to the ceiling and let out a heavy sigh as he and Blake listened to the madri’s footsteps fade away.

“Yikes,” whispered Blake, opening the door and looking out into the hallway. “I’d say that’s punishment enough.”

“Is the coast clear?” Rafe asked.

“Yes,” replied Blake, snapping the door closed and turning to point at Rafe. “Look here, you. Since Baylor is in no condition to talk to me right now, you need to tell me everything that happened tonight, and don’t leave *anything* out.”

“Okay,” he said, forcing a feeble smile, “but you better sit down first. This may take some time.”

THE END

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A labor and delivery nurse for nearly twenty years, L. L. once had dinner with E. B. White, the author of *Charlotte's Web*, and it remains one of the highlights of her life thus far.

She loves tea, children, books, music, art, animals, and lemon meringue pie.

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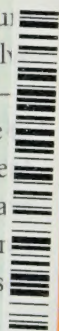
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Strange things happen when the place you call
"Home" is no longer your address.

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD RAFE RYDER'S YEAR COULDN'T GET WORSE. His parents have shipped him off to live with his grandmother and he doesn't know if he'll ever see his sick father again. Arriving in Maine, Rafe plots his return to England, but the possibility of a homecoming slips further from his grasp when an adventure in a corn maze at his new school goes wrong, and he and twelve of his schoolmates are mysteriously transported to Mystfire—a realm of angels, leprechauns, gargoyles and fairies—and home to an elite angelic training school. Forced to co-exist with students who are angels and surrounded by more danger than he ever could have imagined, Rafe searches for a way home only to stumble upon a scheme to destroy the heavens. Can he find a way to save himself and his friends...or will they be lost forever?



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